

Birth trauma doesn't just affect the birthing person. Witnessing a traumatic birth can be very distressing, and some fathers/same sex parents suffer birth trauma or PTSD as a result. The birthing mother or baby doesn't have to have been at risk of death or serious injury for the birth to be experienced as traumatic.

Partners who perceive the birth as threatening to their loved ones can be left traumatised and may experience similar feelings to the birthing mother of intense fear, failure, powerlessness or abandonment.

When one or both partners have experienced the birth as traumatic it can have a profound impact on the couple's relationship. Couples can report a loss of intimacy, an increase in negative feelings towards their partner and of disconnection from each other.

KEY POINTS

The Forgotten Parent: The impact of a traumatic birth is often overlooked for partners who can also be severely traumatised by what they witness.

Masculinity and Birth: Making sense of a traumatic birth can be a different process for men than women. Gender stereotypes about men needing to be 'strong' may make some fathers feel stigmatised if they admit they have been affected by birth or that they shouldn't need support as it didn't happen to them.

The Impact on the Couple Relationship: The experience of a traumatic birth can place the couple relationship under considerable strain. This is an important issue because poor-quality couple relationships can affect the well-being of both the parents and babies.

Birth as a unique experience: The same birth can be experienced completely differently by everyone present. What can be traumatic for one parent can be wonderful for the other parent. For couples this can make the process of recovering from a traumatic birth complicated and may result in them feeling misunderstood and angry towards each other.

WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Parents

If you feel that you may be suffering from birth trauma, please speak to someone you trust. This might be a healthcare professional, friend or family member.

Remember just because you did not give birth it doesn't mean that you can't be affected by birth trauma or in need of support.

For help with your couple relationship: Relate offer counselling services for couples nationwide. NHS IAPT Talking Therapies services offers couples counselling for depression.

Professionals

Encourage couples to talk about the changes in their relationship. Enquire about distress in the couple relationship antenatally and postnatally and offer support/referrals to services.

Check in with how partners are feeling during birth. Remember it is their perception of what is happening to their loved ones that matters.

Plan who/what support will be offered to partners if the situation during birth becomes complicated.

Include partners in postnatal checks for birth trauma.

FURTHER READING

- Birth Trauma Association www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk
- Birthrights www.birthrights.org.uk
- From Dads to Dads www.fromdadstodads.org.uk
- www.oneplusone.space/couple-connection is an online web service for couples providing information, guidance, courses and activities for parents to help improve and strengthen their couple relationship

Books:

- How To Heal A Bad Birth
- Why Birth Trauma Matters