When partners experience *birth trauma*

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

For fathers, co-parents and birth partners who witnessed a frightening birth: what you may be feeling, why it matters, and how to find support.

When a birth is frightening, attention rightly turns to the birthing parent and baby. But partners are in the room too, watching someone they love in pain or danger, often unable to do anything to help. **Partners can be traumatised by birth as well**, and their experience is often overlooked, including by themselves.

A UK study of fathers who witnessed their partner's traumatic birth, titled *Be Quiet and Man Up*, found that fathers reported that witnessing their partner's traumatic birth had a significant impact on them, affecting their mental health and relationships long into the postnatal period. Many felt they were "merely a passenger", and that their feelings were "not about me".

This handout uses the word **partner** to include fathers, co-mothers, non-birthing parents and other birth partners.

After a traumatic birth, partners may notice...

RELIVING
- Flashbacks to the delivery room
- Nightmares
- Replaying "what if"

AVOIDING
- Not wanting to talk about it
- Avoiding the hospital
- Throwing themselves into work

ON EDGE
- Constant worry about partner or baby
- Irritability, anger
- Poor sleep

FEELINGS
- Guilt: "I should have done more"
- Numbness or distance
- Fear of another pregnancy

What makes birth traumatic *for partners*

BIRTHING PARENT

- Pain in the body
- Procedures done to them
- Fear for baby and self
- Loss of control
- May dissociate or remember in fragments

PARTNER

- Watching someone they love suffer
- Helpless, unable to fix it
- Fear for partner and baby
- Often fully alert, so may remember vividly

One birth, two different experiences, both valid.

Same birth, different trauma

The birthing parent experiences the birth in their body. The partner experiences it as a **witness**, often fully alert, standing by, and feeling responsible for protecting their family.

Research has found that partners' post-traumatic stress responses can mirror those of the birthing parent, and that each partner's reactions can affect the other's.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN	HOW IT CAN FEEL
Fearing your partner or baby might die	Terror, panic, horror
Being unable to stop their pain or help	Helpless, useless, guilty
Being sent out of the room, or ignored by staff	Abandoned, invisible, shut out
Not being told what was happening	Confused, frightened, out of control
Seeing blood loss, instruments or emergency procedures	Shock, images that won't go away
Having to choose between staying with partner or going with baby	Torn in two, guilt either way
Being told "Dad, you just sit there"	Like a spectator in your own family's story

“It’s *not about me*”

Many partners push their own feelings aside: their partner is recovering, there is a newborn to care for, and they feel they should be grateful everyone survived. They may also feel that support services are not meant for them. But unacknowledged trauma doesn’t disappear.



The “be strong” trap

Trying to stay strong for your family is understandable and caring. But with no space for your own feelings, trauma symptoms can build and come out in other ways: irritability, withdrawal, working longer hours, drinking more, or feeling numb.

Your partner may read this as distance, leading to strain, and to you feeling you need to hold it together even more.

How it can affect daily life

- Difficulty bonding with the baby
- Overprotectiveness, constant checking
- Anger, often at hospital staff or yourself
- Using alcohol or work to cope
- Fear of sex or of another pregnancy
- Seeing your partner in pain as a trigger
- Feeling low, flat or detached
- Struggling to concentrate at work

POSTNATAL DEPRESSION IN PARTNERS

Partners can also experience postnatal depression and anxiety, especially if the birth was traumatic or the birthing parent is unwell. Signs may look different: anger, risk-taking, withdrawal or physical complaints rather than sadness. **These are real, common and treatable.**

AS A COUPLE

Making sense *of it together*

After a traumatic birth, couples often find they remember it differently. The birthing parent may have gaps or a different sense of time, while the partner may remember every detail, including things the birthing parent never saw. Each may also cope in different ways: one needs to talk about it, the other needs to avoid it.

COMMON CHALLENGE	WHAT MIGHT HELP
Different memories of what happened	Piece your stories together gently. Both versions are true for each of you.
Protecting each other by not talking	Agree a time to talk, and to stop if it gets too much.
One partner's trauma triggers the other's	Notice when you're both overwhelmed, and take turns to support.
Intimacy feels frightening	Go slowly, with no pressure. Talk about fears, and seek support if needed.
Disagreement about another baby	Recognise fear is part of this. Make space before deciding.

Talking about the birth

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

"I keep thinking about the birth. Can we talk about it at some point when you feel ready?"

SHARING YOUR EXPERIENCE

"I was so scared I was going to lose you. I didn't say because I wanted to be strong."

LISTENING

"I didn't know it felt like that for you. Tell me more."

PAUSING

"I need to stop for now, but I do want to come back to this."

Supporting your partner and yourself

You can support your partner's recovery *and* have your own feelings about what happened. Looking after yourself is not selfish: it makes you better able to be there for your family.

TECHNIQUES

Coping *with what you saw*

When a memory takes over

1 · NAME IT
"I'm having a flashback. This is a memory, not happening now."

2 · GROUND
Feet on floor, look around, name five things you can see.

3 · THEN AND NOW
"Then, I was… Now, I am… and I am safe." Say today's date.

4 · BREATHE AND COMFORT
Long, slow out-breaths. A hand on your heart. A warm drink.

Write your own account. Write the birth from your perspective, in your own time. Stop if it becomes overwhelming.

Ask questions. Some maternity units offer a birth reflections service. Ask if partners can attend too.

Talk to other partners. Hearing that others felt the same can reduce isolation and shame.

Move your body. Exercise helps release the stress energy held from the birth.

Watch the coping strategies. Notice if you're relying on alcohol, work or screens to avoid feelings.

Spend calm time with your baby. Skin-to-skin, walks, bath time. Small moments help bonding.

When to seek help

Speak to your GP if, a month or more after the birth, you are still experiencing:

- Flashbacks, nightmares or intrusive images
- Avoidance of reminders or of your baby
- Feeling constantly on edge
- Low mood, numbness or hopelessness
- Anger that feels out of control
- Drinking more, or thoughts of harming yourself

Why therapy *matters*

Partners often don't feel entitled to support after a birth they didn't physically go through. But trauma comes from what we *experience*, including what we witness. Therapy can help you process what you saw, ease guilt and helplessness, reconnect with your partner and baby, and feel more like yourself again.

Partners are very welcome. If you would like a confidential space to talk about what happened, please get in touch at **velvetcouchtherapy.co.uk**.

REFLECTION

1. What part of the birth do I keep coming back to?

2. What did I need in that room that I didn't get?

Recommended reading

Why Birth Trauma Matters
Emma Svanberg (2019)
On birth trauma for both parents, by a clinical psychologist.

Birth Trauma
Kim Thomas (2013)
A guide for you, your partner, friends and family.

Daddy Blues
Mark Williams (2018)
One father's story of postnatal depression and fatherhood.

The Body Keeps the Score
Bessel van der Kolk (2014)
How trauma is held in the body.

Useful websites

Birth Trauma Association
birthtraumaassociation.org.uk
Includes information for partners.

Make Birth Better
makebirthbetter.org
Resources on birth trauma for parents and partners.

CALM
thecalmzone.net · 0800 58 58 58
Support for anyone struggling, including a helpline and webchat.

Mind
mind.org.uk
Information on trauma, PTSD and depression.

Looking after you

If you have thoughts of harming yourself, please speak to your GP or call 999. Samaritans: **116 123** (free, 24 hours). NHS 111, mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Draws on Daniels, Arden-Close & Mayers (2020), *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*; Etheridge & Slade (2017), *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*; Birth Trauma Association. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.