

For this topic we will consider the immediate support we can offer a family, whilst bearing in mind the importance of professionals being aware of their own vulnerabilities and biases in the moment.

It is vital that we make it part of our everyday practice to look out for triggers for birth trauma. For example: Was the birth far from what had been hoped for? Is there a history of trauma or abuse? Was there dissociation or panic during the birth? Have negative attributions such as self-blame been said?

If you suspect a person is experiencing trauma, here are some ways to help:

- Acknowledge their distress
- Refer to any previous wellbeing plans (if available) for means of offering support
- Check how their partner is doing
- Create a sense of safety by providing privacy or facilitating opportunities to rest
- Help the person to feel 'mothered' but not 'smothered'
- Offer a referral to a birth reflection service if wanted
- Offer written material on emotional wellbeing in the postnatal period and signpost to any available support services
- Ensure good levels of communication with the multidisciplinary team (especially when discharging on to another team)
- Ensure that physical wellbeing is also followed up appropriately.

We must also be aware of the positive ways we can care for families during the perinatal journey to prevent trauma. Be aware of possible triggering behaviours in yourself and always strive to show compassion and respect. Think about your language and how you choose to communicate. Actively promote dignity, keep the person informed of any suggested plans and demonstrate a commitment to gaining fully informed consent.

It is also important that we look after ourselves, too. As professionals, we need to manage our own trauma, triggers and emotions. When it comes to your own wellbeing, try to incorporate the following to help you cope with your own potential trauma:

- Write a reflection on your experience with a trusted colleague
- Use your employer's debrief service
- See our document- Self-care for Healthcare Professionals

#### FURTHER READING

Susan Ayers: Birth Trauma & PTSD: the importance of risk and resilience

Twitter #PNDHour chat every Wednesdays 8pm on topics relating to mood and perinatal mental health  
Managing anxiety self-help tools SMILE [www.thesmilegroup.org](http://www.thesmilegroup.org) Help and support managing anxiety & distress

There are certain situations in which families are more likely to experience distress, here is some guidance on what to do:

### Separated from baby?

- Facilitate earliest possible contact with baby, support mother to touch, hold, feed
- Maximise possible contact within constraints of health complications.
- Encourage partner to visit baby if in NICU, take photos, talk with the mother about baby using photos, video recordings, show partner having contact with baby, encourage partner to talk with baby about mother
- Encourage NICU/midwifery staff to give regular updates to mother if unable to see baby.

### Disconnected from baby?

- Beware 'taking over' and disabling a mother who may already feel disempowered.
- Say "How can we help?" and offer support with feeding choices.
- Give encouragement about her abilities by role-modelling not disempowering or overwhelming with your 'professional expertise'.

### Feels unable to care for baby?

- Affirm that she is the parent and has been for entire gestation, encourage contact with baby – look, touch, talk
- Reassure that baby already knows their voices and is wanting to connect with them, encourage and reinforce positive contact with baby and response from baby
- Help reinforce the developing relationship.
- At discharge, consider offering referral for further support with PIMH specialist services.

### Heightened distress?

- Be patient and compassionate.
  - Empathise with their experiences.
  - Share information with other HCPs to ensure appropriate support and attitudes.
  - Try to facilitate continuity of carer where possible and ensure prompt community follow up.
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- Start with yourself- acknowledge areas that are highly emotive for you and if you are struggling consider support from you employer's debrief service.
  - Remember that during the perinatal period people are extremely vulnerable and you, as a healthcare professional, are in a position of power. Therefore, always act from a place of compassion.
  - If you suspect a person is experiencing trauma, take action. Start by simply acknowledging their distress and listening to what they are saying. Then begin to formulate a plan together, detailing where further support can be accessed and referring to specialist services where appropriate