

If your birth didn't go as you planned, you're not alone. As **Linda Barnier** discovered, birth trauma affects one in three women but there are ways to heal and move on

Fixing the hurt

Anna was excited about the birth of her first child. She was over her due date and decided to go to hospital and be given prostaglandin gel to help things along. That night, her husband went home to get some sleep before her waters were to be broken the next day. But she went into labour and things progressed so quickly that he arrived just as she was pushing their baby out. "I felt out of control, alone, confused, scared, unprepared and let down by hospital staff," Anna says. "As a result, I didn't really connect with my baby until we came home."

Anna is one of the many women who have been distressed by their birth experience. In fact, a new Australian study has found one in three women have had a traumatic birthing event.

"It can happen to any woman, in any birthing scenario, be it emergency or elective caesarean, vaginal birth with intervention, drug-free birth, private or public hospital, or home birth," says midwife Debby Gould, a childbirth educator and co-founder of birth support and education organisation Birthtalk.

These women have received poor care, emotionally and technically, says researcher Dr Jenny Gamble, and often birth trauma is associated with obstetric interventions, particularly when

Kelly's story

I'd like to share two important realisations: it's okay to feel unhappy about your birth experience, even when you have a healthy baby, and, you can heal.

The birth of my first baby was the most distressing experience of my life. I had an emergency caesarean for foetal distress and this, coupled with the events leading up to it, left me feeling scared, powerless and utterly crushed. When Hudson was lifted from me I felt consumed by love, but it felt wrong to have other people touching and looking at him while he screamed. I couldn't reach him.

At home I closed off from my husband, seeing him as a busboy for food and nappies. I felt threatened by motherly women. Slowly, I realised the change in some of my relationships wasn't about having a new baby, but about the trauma I'd experienced.

A few months later I met an amazing midwife. She helped me

debrief many times and gave me huge amounts of validation so I could finally voice what was in my heart – my birth experience had been traumatic and scary, and not how birth should be.

There have been some critical steps on my path to healing. Having other people understand what I'd been through eventually allowed me to let go of the angry and negative emotions, learn to trust my body and help my husband and I to make the right choices for my second pregnancy.

Broderick was born, vaginally, into his father's arms after eight hours of labour. After Brody's birth I felt calm and peaceful rather than anxious or threatened. I walked into motherhood this time free, whole and strong.

Brody's birth contributed to my healing from Huddy's birth, too. The major difference from my first experience was that all the decisions were made with informed choice.

I don't think the system currently set up for birthing women provides the education and choices we need.

performed as emergency procedures.

"Intervention can make a woman feel frightened and powerless," she says. "If her caregivers aren't attentive to her needs, she can be left feeling fearful for her life, or her baby's life, or that she or the baby will be seriously injured or permanently damaged."

A traumatic experience can also lead to the development of post traumatic stress disorder, she adds. "PTSD is an anxiety disorder and many women with it also develop depression. A woman with PTSD can have distressing flashbacks or nightmares, sleeping difficulties or anger outbursts.

Photography: Getty Images



She may also feel isolated from her family and friends, and have trouble bonding with her baby."

Dashed expectations

In Debby's experience at Birthtalk, nearly every traumatised woman seeking help there says they felt powerless, confused, frightened, isolated, abandoned or unacknowledged, or a combination of these, during the birth, then "empty" and disappointed afterwards. "There is a sense of loss, grief, anger and trauma," she says.

Initially, a lot of women blame the "failure" of the birthing process on having an unrealistic birth plan, says Debby. "They feel silly for having such expectations. But even though a birth plan can be a good tool to highlight and communicate what is important to a couple, it is only one piece in the puzzle of working towards a positive birth."

This kind of negative birthing experience can also leave a new mother feeling less than confident about her mothering skills, hypervigilant about her baby's care, unable to bond with

her baby, angry with her partner or feeling like a failure.

Feelings of guilt

Many women feel tremendous guilt for feeling this way about what is supposed to be the best day of their life – especially if they feel it was the worst.

"I thought I should regard myself as lucky to have had a quick labour and a vaginal birth," says Anna. "I thought I should focus on the healthy baby outcome instead of allowing myself to feel regret and ponder why and

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what exactly had happened. It was so bewildering to have negative feelings about my son's birth. It left me feeling like a wimp and quite fearful about having another child."

Letting go

If a woman can't 'let go' of the negative experience and keeps going over it and constantly thinking about it, support may help her to process her feelings and move on from the experience.

"If she is showing signs of post traumatic stress disorder, such as avoiding driving past the hospital where the baby was born, then she could greatly benefit from the right support," says Debby. "Or if she would like to have another baby but cannot imagine going through it again, support and understanding around her first experience may help."

Finding the right support can be difficult. "That's why Birthtalk was

“If a woman has worked through what happened during the first birth, the next birth can be healing”

created," she says. "One of the founders was unable to find much help after her own traumatic birth and she was determined that other women shouldn't have to experience such isolation and confusion. Birthtalk receives emails from women all over Australia looking for support."

Talking about the birth to someone who understands the importance of the experience can play a major role in the healing process, says Debby. "They need someone who understands what they are going through. Then

Take two for Tammy

I had a hard time getting on top of things after my first son was delivered by emergency caesarean.

I was frightened from the moment I made my first call to the hospital. As decisions were made around us, even though we were consulted we felt like we weren't really being given a choice. My husband and I were left alone at very vulnerable times and not given guidance or support.

After arriving home from hospital I started to feel more and more like a failure. I had trouble breastfeeding and bonding with Jack and found the toll on my body hard to cope with. I was having panic attacks when I tried to get out of the house. My husband couldn't understand what was going on.

I went to Birthtalk when I became pregnant with my second child. It's been great to talk to other women who have experienced the same thing. Sometimes when you hear

another woman tell her story you'd swear she was telling your own.

It totally changed the way I approached my second birth. I wasn't aware of the different models of care available and I was encouraged to explore and research what would suit my husband and me best.

William's birth was so different to Jack's. I was able to trust my body and question the doctors when they didn't offer options. I managed the pain knowing how my body was working to birth my baby.

I have learned through my experience not to take the first advice given, to explore my options, trust my instincts, seek a second opinion and research to make educated decisions.

William's birth has brought me closer to both of my boys. I have been able to bond with Will and Jack, and feel competent and strong about my capabilities as a mother.

they need support and education."

Dr Gamble agrees. Her research has shown that this approach where understanding midwives counsel traumatised women can indeed reduce the stress, depression and self-blame they feel, and improve their confidence about becoming

pregnant and giving birth again.

Sometimes, if a woman has worked through what happened during the first birth, the next birth can be healing. However Dr Gamble warns that because these women are already vulnerable, extra care is needed so another pregnancy doesn't trigger the stress, depression and fear again.

"What women do need to know," says Debby, "is that with the right education and support, they can go on to have empowering, positive pregnancies and births."

Anna found help through an education and support group that offered the opportunity to connect with other women who'd had similar experiences. "It has changed my views, knowledge and feelings about birth," she says. "I've received validation, support and respect from my group. Learning that I did a good job in a difficult situation has freed me from being so hard on myself."

She is now pregnant with her second child. "This time, my husband and I will be informed and prepared," she says. "I will also have a doula with me for extra support. I feel empowered to be proactive about planning for the birth and negotiating my care with the professionals so my needs are fully met."

Where to get help

■ **Birthtalk:** (07) 3878 7915 or www.birthtalk.org

■ **Caesarean Awareness Network Australia (CANA):** (07) 3878 7915 or www.canaustralia.net

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