

Every year there are 5.1 million births in the EU. Up to 30% of women perceive their birth as traumatic, which is equivalent to 1.5 million annually.

## Recommendations to prevent traumatic births

Leaflet of key recommendations for practice based on current evidence and knowledge developed by COST Action 18211 DEVOTION



A **POSITIVE** childbirth experience refers to a woman's experience of interactions and events directly related to childbirth that made her feel supported, in control, safe, and respected; a positive childbirth can make women feel joy, confident, and/or accomplished and may have short and/or long-term positive impacts on a woman's psychosocial well-being.

"The feeling of energy, of falling in love, was so strong that it is indescribable."

A **TRAUMATIC** childbirth experience refers to a woman's experience of interactions and/or events directly related to childbirth that caused overwhelming distressing emotions and reactions; leading to short and/or long-term negative impacts on a woman's health and well-being.

"They made a lot of interventions. I felt like somebody had stolen something from me. I knew at this point what I wanted, and they didn't respect my decisions."



1

Clinicians must interact with childbearing women and their families in ways that maximize positive birth experiences and minimize negative experiences for women and their supporting persons.

2

Clinicians must respond to childbirth-related mental health problems with compassion, understanding, and respect.

3

Clinicians must respect women's rights to autonomy before, during, and after birth i.e. obstetric violence must stop and women must receive responsive care.

4

Routine clinical outcomes should incorporate assessment of parents' experiences of care and identification of negative birth experiences in order to evaluate and improve care.

5

Principles of trauma-informed care need to be integrated across all maternity care settings and into clinical training programs.

6

Following an experience of childbirth-related trauma, secondary prevention and treatment of perinatal mental health issues must include the family as a whole and focus on prevention in a subsequent pregnancy and birth.

### Principles of trauma-informed care:



safety



choice



collaboration



trustworthiness



empowerment

## FIRST STEPS:

- 1 Check-in with your colleagues! Find a place for the whole team to reflect together and share ideas to improve your work environment.
- 2 Involve parents - it's important for them to get their questions answered as best as possible or just talk about their experience. It will also benefit you and your colleagues to hear a different perspective.
- 3 Take care of yourself! Witnessing stressful situations every day can cause secondary trauma, something commonly observed in maternity staff.
- 4 Think of small steps you can take together, like sharing research articles or having an idea board in the ward. It doesn't have to cost much or take up lots of time, small steps together can make a big difference.
- 5 For more inspiration and to connect, visit Respect Toolkit:



An international group of expert researchers and clinicians in the field of perinatal mental health from 33 countries have come to a consensus on the key recommendations presented in this leaflet for practice, policy, research and theory.

### Find out more

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COST 18211 Research Outputs:



WHAT DOES BIRTH TRAUMA LOOK LIKE? AND WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

## HOW TO MAKE BIRTH BETTER

"The feeling of energy, of falling in love, was so strong that it is indescribable."

"The baby's heart rate had slowed right down, and as I was still only 3cm dilated, the doctor decided to do an emergency Caesarean. Suddenly the room was full of people rushing around, but giving no reassurance, so I was left feeling so scared that I was shaking, and completely helpless."

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## RESEARCH FOUND THAT:

"A **POSITIVE** childbirth experience refers to a woman's experience of interactions and events directly related to childbirth that made her feel supported, in control, safe, and respected; a positive childbirth can make women feel joy, confident, and/or accomplished and may have short and/or long-term positive impacts on a woman's psychosocial well-being."

Every year there are 5.1 million births in the EU. Up to 30% of women perceive their birth as traumatic which equals up to 1.5 million annually. You are not alone!

About 4% of women and 1% of partners present at the birth develop childbirth-related PTSD (CB-PTSD).

PTSD stands for post-traumatic stress disorder. It is a mental health condition that can happen when someone experiences or witnesses a very scary or upsetting event. Some of the symptoms of PTSD are having intrusive traumatic memories or nightmares about the event, feeling very anxious or angry, avoiding things that remind them of the event, and having trouble sleeping or concentrating. PTSD is treated with therapy, or, less frequently, with medication.

### Four clusters of PTSD symptoms:



During labour and birth, traumatic events may relate to obstetric complications and/or interventions...

*however*

interpersonal trauma (trauma caused by interactions with others), e.g. interactions with staff during birth, has been found to be **TWICE AS LIKELY** to cause long-term PTSD symptoms as trauma tied to events.

When a woman has a bad experience during childbirth, she might get very scared and stressed. This can affect how her body works, like her heart rate, blood pressure, and how she fights diseases. These changes can also affect her baby, even before or after it is born.

### This is what you can do:

- 01** If you experience any of these symptoms, please ask a health professional for help.
- 02** Make contact with other parents in your area, or online. Other people experience birth trauma – you are not alone.
- 03** Write to your local politicians and share your concerns with them. The evidence is available, it needs to be implemented.

YOU have the right to be treated well and respected before, during, and after childbirth.

### Find out more

<https://www.ca18211.eu/>  
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If you are experiencing psychological difficulties please reach out to:



! Traumatic birth experiences generate significant costs for healthcare systems, with possible economic consequences for society as a whole. !

## HOW TO MAKE BIRTH BETTER

Leaflet of key recommendations for policy based on current evidence and knowledge developed by COST Action 18211 DEVOTION

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF CHILDBIRTH?



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Risk of mothers with postpartum PTSD to not initiate breastfeeding is nearly

**six times higher**

than in mothers without postpartum PTSD as well as related to non-continuation of breastfeeding up to one year.

Negative impact of PTSD is transmitted to next generations; parents with PTSD may experience **reproductive issues** - they are less likely to have more children after experiencing a traumatic childbirth and if they do, it can take them longer compared to parents without PTSD.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Healthcare policies for maternity and mental health services should include specific recommendations for prevention, detection, and treatment of traumatic birth and CB-PTSD.

1

National and international guidelines for maternity care and mental health care are needed to increase awareness of perinatal mental health problems, including traumatic birth and CB-PTSD, and outline evidence-based, practical strategies for detection, prevention and treatment.

2

Policy needs to support models of maternity care that have women's rights and needs at the center of their care, including the prevention of obstetric violence and mental health problems.

3

Maternity care services need to offer routine screening for perinatal mental health and traumatic birth as part of family-centered, integrated care.

4

Maternity services need to be resourced to act on feedback around respectful care, including dignity, autonomy, and healthcare providers' communication and interaction with women.

5

Continuing education in trauma-informed care needs to be provided to all staff in maternity care to support prevention, detection and treatment of those with mental health problems.

6

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