

Have all your employees recovered from giving birth?

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Every year, around 20,000 women go through a traumatic birth experience that has lasting implications not only for their physical and mental health, but also their ability to function at work.

Although most employers might think they're getting back the same employee who went on maternity leave, thousands of women are still suffering the consequences. This might include undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following a difficult or frightening birth, during which their life, or the life of their baby might have been at risk.

Many of those struggling to cope might feel guilty about seeking help if they managed to leave hospital with a healthy baby. They might experience flashbacks, constant fear that their baby or someone they love might die or be at risk and be suffering from insomnia issues. The Birth Trauma Association estimates that 1,000 women developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Wales alone last year, yet just 22 cases were recorded.

This document shares some top tips on how you can help those affected by this widespread issue to overcome their experience, before it can spiral into Post Natal Depression or, more seriously, as PTSD.

How to help employees recover from a traumatic birth

1. Provide timely support

Although it makes sense not to forewarn expectant mothers of all the things that might go wrong when they give birth, for fear of making them so anxious that this in itself causes problems, it's also important to bear in mind that giving birth isn't a positive experience for everyone. As with any traumatic experiences, none of us are expecting that it will happen to us.

When you call your employee to congratulate them, you have the best opportunity to also check with your employee how things went and to identify if they've had a traumatic experience or not. Knowing at this stage will also help you to plan for their return.

Instead of just asking if the baby is a boy or a girl and how much it weighed, ask your employee – be it the mother or father – how the birth went and how everyone's feeling. If they're clearly distressed about their experience and suffering from the symptoms of trauma, which include shock or denial about what happened, anxiety and fear, guilt, shame, self-blame, feeling sad, hopeless or disconnected and numb, the sooner you can assure them that there is emotional support, when they are ready to take it, the better. However, being new parents, no matter if it is the first or 3rd child, is also a time where changes are a fact and everyone has to come to terms with their new role in the family, so attending counselling might not be easy to find time for, even though we know it is very helpful in the early days after a traumatic event.

2. Advocate psychological first aid

As with any other trauma, how the employee is helped to recover and make sense of their experience and get the right support is critical to helping to prevent psychological problems from developing further down the line. Although they will no doubt have numerous healthcare professionals surrounding them in the days after the birth, especially if still hospitalised, many of these doctors, nurses and midwives will be more concerned with the physical recovery of the mother and child, than with her or her partner's emotional recovery.

If the birth was particularly traumatic, those involved will gain from being offered Psychological First Aid (PFA) to help them feel safe and calm again, in much the same way that someone experiencing an attack or witnessing a serious car crash might. This involves attending to basic needs with compassion, by giving the employee the space they need to relive and make sense of their experience, while also encouraging them to do small practical things that make themselves feel safe again.

Rather than rely on stretched healthcare professionals to provide this, if you suspect that your employee has experienced a traumatic birth, remind them that they still have access to their Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and the specialist support this can provide, even while they're on maternity or paternity leave.

If your organisation doesn't provide access to qualified trauma specialists as part of your EAP, you can still support your employee, by providing them with a list of specialist charities they can call for support instead.

3. Allow them to relive their experience

The desire of someone affected by a traumatic event to talk about it will persist for far longer than the desire of those surrounding them to hear about it.

Let's take male employees. They will often return to work very soon after becoming a Dad, and those who witnessed a particularly traumatic birth will most likely still be struggling to make sense of it. They might want to keep reliving what happened, as there is a healing element in doing so that is incredibly important for them. So, rather than trying to change the topic or dismiss their concerns by pointing out that it all worked out okay – in the event that everyone survived, – colleagues should give them the space they need to make sense of their partner's ordeal.

You can even ask them how they had imagined the birth would go, or how they expected it to go, to help them express their distress at how differently things transpired. In many cases, a birth can be traumatic simply by the lack of control those involved felt. The most common feeling after such a situation, where the partner was reduced to a bystander is helplessness, and so very different to what they'd envisaged - for example, if the mother was rushed into theatre and the baby removed via an emergency operation, leaving the Dad feeling powerless to support his partner in the way he had prepared to do. All the things he learned during the pre-natal class, were of no use to him, and he might feel the loss of the expected experience of taking part.

Whatever went 'wrong' (and in these situations, perception might be as horrific as reality), part of their recovery will involve acknowledging that their birth experience wasn't what they had hoped for. Talking about how this made them feel is part of the process of coming to terms with this.

4. Accept healing takes time

It takes time to recover from a traumatic event, to feel that you or your loved ones are safe again and for that event not to define your future or affect your relationships with others.

Most people who have been through a traumatic experience will remain scarred by it, but there comes a point at which the initial wounds heal and the scars, while always there, cease to hurt, allowing the person to start functioning as normal again.

The time taken to get to this point will vary from person to person depending on their resilience, the degree of shock they went through and the strength of existing support networks. Employers can help by encouraging managers to view managing the mental health of employees as part of their overall people duties and encouraging them to have 'safe and sensitive' conversations with any employee in distress so that they can be directed towards appropriate support services.

Remember that what enables one person to heal will be very different to what enables another to heal. For example, while pointing out positive outcomes, such as the addition of a healthy baby to the family, might help one person to come to terms with a traumatic birth, it could make someone else feel resentful towards their baby or partner about the price their body had to pay to achieve this.

As a manager, it is important to let the person know that your door is open and they can come to you when they need a bit of extra support. However, rather than attempting to counsel or reassure the employee, it's far better to listen with compassion and then direct them towards appropriate psychological support, and so allowing them to come to terms with what happened in their own time.

Please note: The EAP/Health and Wellbeing Helpline is not available to family member(s) under 16 years of age. It is optional on Precision Corporate Healthcare and our large corporate schemes so please check your WPA literature carefully to see if you have this benefit.