

MEDIA RELEASE

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Press release: "It allowed me to have a safe place to express my fears": a pioneering new service helps women traumatised by birth

When Amy Dawes gave birth to her first daughter five years ago, the forceps delivery left her with devastating injuries. But it wasn't until her baby was 16 months old that Amy was diagnosed with bladder and bowel injuries caused by the birth.

Amy's experience has made her determined that other women shouldn't suffer in silence. Last year, she founded the Australasian Birth Trauma Association (ABTA), the first charity in Australia to support women affected psychologically or physically by a traumatic birth. ABTA has now launched a chat service that enables any woman who has had a traumatic birth to talk to someone who's been through a similar experience – and come out the other end.

The free service, which women can access through the ABTA website birthtrauma.org.au, is available Monday-Friday 8-10pm AEST. Women can chat for up to half an hour with one of 15 trained peer support mentors who have themselves been affected by a traumatic birth.

About 9,000 women a year develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after birth in Australia, but the condition is under-diagnosed and sometimes confused with postnatal depression.

Physical injuries are also common: one in five Australian women at some point in their life will require help for organ prolapse – a condition where the bladder, uterus and or bowel either protrude into the vagina or press against the wall of the vagina, often resulting in pain and incontinence.

"I often felt alone in my suffering"

Since its launch in August 2018, many women have benefited from this service. One says: "Peer support was invaluable in my recovery because it allowed me to have a safe place to express my fears, ask questions and be heard by someone who can truly relate to what I was going through. Prolapse and postnatal depression and anxiety are rarely spoken about and I often felt alone in my suffering, until of course I was linked up with another wonderful woman who was willing to listen and understand my pain. Still to this day, if I'm feeling unsure or scared, speaking with another woman in the same situation is the quickest way to reassure my anxieties."

The service has won the backing of Professor Bryanne Barnett, a perinatal psychiatrist and ABTA board member, who says: "As health professionals involved with ABTA, we are very aware that traumatised women and their families often do not know where to turn to find help for their overwhelmingly distressing situation. Contacting health professionals is not simple – the situation may already be dire but you may have to wait some time for an expensive appointment. Talking to peers is a free and they may be accessible at the times you need help, not at a date many weeks away. Our peer volunteers not only have the relevant personal experience of the problems, they also have invaluable experience of potential remedies (psychological and physical) and they have actively offered to help."

Sharing your story with someone who understands

ABTA's volunteer manager, Christine Percy says the service provides a lifeline to many women who are desperate for support: "By the time women contact ABTA, they have often been reaching out for help but haven't quite found the support they need. Our peer-to-peer program not only provides them with a safe space to share their story with someone who truly understands, but it can also fast track their search for support solutions and service providers that are trauma-aware and able to help."

For Amy Dawes, the service is a way of making sure that other women find the same kind of support that eventually helped her to recover: "After navigating my own journey with birth trauma, a crucial step to processing it all was the fact that I was able to connect with other women who have shared a similar experience to me, but were far enough along in their own healing to help me to seek the right help while providing me with hope. Most importantly, the hope that things can and will, get better."

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For further information or photography, or to interview any of our peer supporters, contact:
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