

## MEDIA RELEASE

# Calls for better standard of care as 1 in 3 Australian births reported as traumatic

**16 JULY 2023** – New research published today by the Australasian Birth Trauma Association (ABTA) has prompted new calls for improved education for health professionals and expecting parents to ensure better prevention and treatment of conditions relating to birth-related trauma.

Published ahead of Birth Trauma Awareness Week (16-17 July), the research reveals one in three people who have given birth in the last five years report their birth to be traumatic (33%), with one in ten (12%) reporting it to be extremely traumatic. The sample included Australian birthing parents<sup>1</sup> who had either experienced physical injuries (27%), mental health challenges (44%), or both as a result of childbirth (28%).

The research uncovered a staggering 79% of birthing parents reported experiencing at least one symptom of postpartum post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>2</sup> after giving birth. Nearly one in three (30%) reported symptoms of anxiety, nearly one in five (19%) said they experienced vivid flashbacks or nightmares, and over one in five (22%) felt overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, guilt or shame. 21% report avoiding feelings or memories of birth entirely.

Despite the prevalence of symptoms and the immense impact that they can have on all facets of life, less than half (41%) of birthing parents surveyed had heard of postpartum PTSD prior to the delivery of their child.

Amy Dawes, Co-founder and CEO of the Australasian Birth Trauma Association and 2023 Order of Australia recipient, said a significant lack of awareness of the risks of childbirth is contributing directly to rates of birth-related trauma.

“Our research shows that postpartum PTSD impacts every single area of people’s lives – from their relationships to their self-esteem and their ability to bond with their baby. Many parents also report being unable to continue working as a result of their birth trauma. This is why it is so important for parents and health professionals to be educated on how to recognise the signs and symptoms. While not all parents may meet the full criteria for a formal PTSD diagnosis, many may benefit from specialised trauma-based therapies,” said Dawes.

Over a third (35%) of women say their symptoms of postpartum PTSD have impacted their relationship with their partner, caused them to struggle to be intimate with their partner, or led them to lose their sense of self. Over half (56%) expressed they struggle with low self-esteem and body confidence as a result of their birth experience, and over a quarter now won’t have more children (26%).

“We know that birth-related trauma can often be caused by things not going according to plan, and unfortunately, parents are often blindsided by outcomes during labour and delivery and the impact of birth-related trauma. Our research found that only 18% of Australian births go as planned, so we need our maternity care providers to provide comprehensive and realistic education about the range of potential outcomes during labour and birth. This means helping birthing families make informed decisions about birth interventions, providing trauma-informed care and ensuring that parents are signposted to support services after the birth,” Dawes added.

## Barriers to support

The research also highlights the gap in ongoing support for new parents that experience mental and physical trauma, often leaving them to fend for themselves.

Over two in five (42%) women surveyed say they have not been screened for postpartum PTSD by a health professional, which may result in parents either receiving a mis or delayed diagnosis, which can further exacerbate symptoms.

<sup>1</sup> Birthing parent refers to anyone who has/will give birth. The survey by the Australasian Birth Trauma Association received 1,002 respondents. 99.5% identified as female, 0.5% identified as non-binary.

<sup>2</sup> Postpartum PTSD can be caused by psychological trauma experienced during childbirth and can present multiple symptoms including intrusive thoughts, intense worry, depression, anger or guilt, or feeling a sense of hopelessness about the future. Australasian Birth Trauma Association. POSTPARTUM TRAUMA DISORDERS (E.G. PTSD). Available at: <https://birthtrauma.org.au/postpartum-trauma-disorders-e-g-ptsd/>

Almost one in five (17%) women report not telling anyone about their postpartum PTSD symptoms, and almost half (44%) of respondents say they didn't seek any treatment to manage their symptoms. Only 1 in 4 (26%) discussed their postpartum PTSD symptoms with a GP, and even fewer spoke with their child and maternal health nurse (13%). Concerningly, questions around mental health symptoms as part of post-birth follow-up routines were asked less than half of the time (46%) by health professionals.

While conversations around postnatal depression and anxiety have improved in recent years, postpartum PTSD remains largely unknown and often mis/underdiagnosed despite it occurring in up to 15% of birthing parents in the first six months postpartum.<sup>3</sup> This means that mothers, fathers, and non-birthing parents are still falling through the gaps in healthcare and may not be receiving the best treatment for their needs.

"We must implement a new standard of care that sees every parent routinely asked about birth-related trauma because recognising early responses to a traumatic birth and providing advice and support can reduce the risk of PTSD developing," said Dawes.

Some progress has been made on this, with the Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) releasing updated Australian Clinical Practice Guidelines in June. This represented the first time ever that psychological birth trauma has been recognised in standardised guidelines for maternity health professionals. Other research has shown that The City Birth Trauma Scale - a self-report measure of PTSD symptoms following childbirth already used in the United Kingdom - could present a new reliable measure of childbirth-related PTSD for Australian parents if rolled out broadly.<sup>4</sup>

Dr Narelle Dickson, Clinical and Health Psychologist and Fertility Psychologist says it is important for Australian health professionals to take a trauma-informed approach to care for birthing parents.

"A trauma-informed approach starts with the right questions. We know from Australasian Birth Trauma Association's research that almost one in four Australian women who recently gave birth feel like nobody understands their experience. It's our job to let them know that we understand, and we are here to provide or direct them to the support that's right for them."

## A big step for change

This Birth Trauma Awareness Week also sees the launch of the [BIG Step Challenge](#). This calls on all Australians to step forward for safer births and better healing by pledging to take 110,000 steps - one step for every traumatic birth experience in Australia per year - to raise vital funds to support families impacted by birth-related trauma.

"The birthing experience affects everyone differently. It's vital that we all play our part in ensuring women, birthing people, fathers and non-birthing parents are not falling through the gaps in healthcare and receive the best treatment for their unique and individual set of needs," concluded Dawes.

Visit [www.birhtrauma.org.au](http://www.birhtrauma.org.au) to learn more about the signs and symptoms of birth-related trauma, including postpartum PTSD.

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

The study was conducted online between May and June 2023. The survey was conducted with 1,002 Australian birthing parents (95.5% female; 0.5% non-binary) between the age of 18 to 50 years old who have given birth in the past 5 years and experienced physical injuries and/or mental health challenges as a result of their childbirth experience. For the purposes of this survey, birth refers to vaginal or caesarean section delivery after 20 weeks gestation.

<sup>3</sup> Australasian Birth Trauma Association. BIRTH TRAUMA AWARENESS WEEK 2023. Available at: <https://birhtrauma.org.au/birth-trauma-awareness-week-2023/>

<sup>4</sup> Fameil A, Costa D, Coddington R, Hawes DH. Assessment of childbirth-related post traumatic stress disorder in Australian mothers: Psychometric properties of the City Birth Trauma Scale. J Affect Disord. 2023 Mar 1;324:559-565. doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2022.12.123.

## **ABOUT THE AUSTRALASIAN BIRTH TRAUMA ASSOCIATION**

The Australasian Birth Trauma Association is the peak charity dedicated to helping prevent, diagnose, and treat birth-related trauma. Our vision is for safer births, better healing. We provide important resources and peer-to-peer support to Australian families impacted by birth-related trauma, including psychological and/or physical birth trauma. We collaborate with parents and a wide range of health professionals to raise awareness, provide support and education, conduct research, and advocate for policy change to ensure better standards of care across Australia's maternity system. [www.birthtrauma.org.au](http://www.birthtrauma.org.au)