

Trauma after Childbirth: The Mediating Effects of Subjective Experience

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Abstract : Background: Many women experience their childbirth as traumatic, and 4-6% of mothers present with postnatal posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their birth. Aims: To measure the relationship between obstetric and subjective experience of childbirth on mothers' experience of postnatal trauma and identify salient aspects of the birth experience considered traumatic. Methods: Women who had given birth within the last year completed an online mixed-methods survey reporting on their subjective and obstetric birth experience as well as symptoms of postnatal trauma, depression and anxiety. Findings: 29% of mothers experienced their labour as traumatic and 15% met full or partial criteria for PTSD. Feeling supported and in control mediated the relationship between obstetric intervention and postnatal trauma symptoms. Five key themes were identified from the qualitative data regarding aspects of the birth considered traumatic including: obstetric complications; lack of control; concern for baby; psychological trauma and lack of support. Conclusion: Subjective birth experience is a significantly stronger predictor of postnatal trauma than level of medical intervention, the psychological consequences of which can be buffered by an increased level of support and control.

Keywords : birth trauma, perinatal mental health, postnatal PTSD, subjective experience

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