

# The Importance of The Pre-discharge Care Discussion

## Initiating Healing After a Severe Maternal Event (SME)

### What is birth trauma?

Birth trauma is any experience related to birth that overwhelms the nervous system's ability to cope. Up to 45% of pregnant patients report feeling traumatized by their birth experience<sup>1</sup>. Feeling traumatized by a birth experience is not a choice, but an automatic response of the nervous system to protect the patient from a perceived threat. Birth trauma is caused by a wide range of experiences and is subjective in nature. An event that is traumatic for one patient, may not be experienced as traumatic by another. A life-threatening experience or perceived life-threatening experience during birth leaves patients at an increased risk for birth trauma.

### Why is birth trauma important in the context of a Severe Maternal Event?

Research indicates that experiencing a SME increases the risk for developing PTSD as well as other mental health conditions postpartum.<sup>2,3</sup> A patient's expected outcome for their birth often lies in stark contrast to the experience of almost dying, making this reality difficult for most to comprehend. Many patients report leaving the hospital with no clear understanding about the events of their birth, which can lead to further confusion and feelings of isolation, compounding symptoms of trauma.

### How can you help mitigate trauma and improve mental health outcomes?

Not all trauma within the context of severe maternal events can be prevented, but it can be mitigated through compassion, acknowledgement, and detailed care discussions. Pre-discharge care discussions play a crucial role in trauma-informed care for patients following a severe maternal event. One of the most common concerns from patients after experiencing a traumatic birth is that they do not fully understand what happened during their birth. Health care providers should take the time to meet with patients who have experienced a severe maternal event to ensure a thorough understanding of what occurred, address any questions or concerns, and plan ongoing care. By offering a care discussion, patients gain a clearer understanding of their treatment and have the opportunity to ask questions. Care discussions not only offer information, but for many patients, they provide a starting point for their physical and emotional healing after an SME.

This discussion, ideally involving familiar faces such as the senior physician, a known nurse, and a social worker, helps initiate the process of closure and provides emotional support. Providers must use clear, empathetic language, avoid assigning blame, and facilitate an open dialogue to support the patient's recovery and future health. This careful approach helps in creating a supportive environment for the patient and her family, ensuring they feel heard and understood, and preparing them for the next steps in their care journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Beck CT, Watson S, Gable RK. Traumatic Childbirth and Its Aftermath: Is There Anything Positive? *J Perinat Educ*. 2018 Jun;27(3):175-184. doi: 10.1891/1058-1243.27.3.175.

<sup>2</sup> Lewkowitz AK, Rosenbloom JI, Keller M, López JD, Macones GA, Olsen MA, Cahill AG. Association Between Severe Maternal Morbidity and Psychiatric Illness Within 1 Year of Hospital Discharge After Delivery. *Obstet Gynecol*. 2019 Oct;134(4):695-707. doi: 10.1097/AOG.0000000000003434.

<sup>3</sup> Duval CJ, Youssefzadeh AC, Sweeney HE, McGough AM, Mandelbaum RS, Ouzounian JG, Matsuo K. Association of severe maternal morbidity and post-traumatic stress disorder. *AJOG Glob Rep*. 2022 Sep 28;2(4):100111. doi: 10.1016/j.xagr.2022.100111.