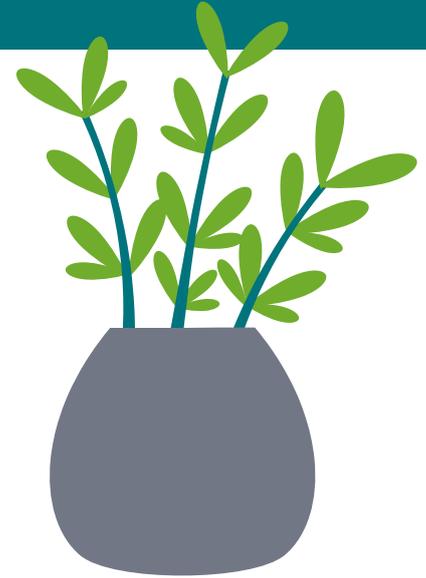




Coping with traumatic memories through pregnancy

Although it is often viewed as a joyful time, pregnancy can be difficult and stressful for women who have experienced sexual trauma in their past. There are lots of supports available, as well as tips that can make the experience less stressful. Every woman is different, so it is important for you to find what works to make things easier for you.



Some of the common fears and experiences for pregnant women include:

- ▶ feeling a lack of control
- ▶ avoiding medical appointments
- ▶ avoiding social activities and events
- ▶ fear about being touched
- ▶ fear of vaginal examinations
- ▶ fear of breast feeding
- ▶ hating your own body
- ▶ feelings of shame, distress or fear
- ▶ distressing memories
- ▶ fear of giving birth
- ▶ fear of losing your baby because you were injured due to violence
- ▶ experiencing flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and suicidal thoughts
- ▶ worrying about parenting and being a mother.

It is possible for you to get through pregnancy and giving birth.

Remember that you don't have to go through it alone. There are people who can support you.

Memories of sexual trauma can surface at any time. It might be the first time you fall pregnant, or it might be during a second or third pregnancy. Memories can surface when your child turns the age you were when you experienced abuse.

During pregnancy is not the time to address your past sexual trauma in detail - this can be done at a later date. What is important is finding support and ways for you to cope during your pregnancy so that your wellbeing, and your baby's health, can be taken care of.

Letting others know

- ▶ If you feel safe, consider talking with your partner, family or a trusted friend about your fears and struggles.
- ▶ Let your doctor and midwife know that you have experienced trauma in your past which is making things difficult for you. You don't need to give them details of what happened. SARC has developed a health appointment form, available on the SARC website, to make appointments easier for trauma survivors. You can choose to fill this in and provide it to health workers.
- ▶ Contact a support service to talk through your fears and experiences. Some options are listed at the end of this handout.



Helpful coping tips

- ▶ Do exercises that give you a sense of power and control over your body (check with your doctor before doing any intense exercises).
- ▶ Have a break by doing fun activities that aren't related to pregnancy, birth or mothering.
- ▶ Keep connected to positive, supportive people and your community.

- ▶ Meet other women in a similar position to you.
- ▶ Learn about pregnancy and child birth.
- ▶ Develop a birth plan to give you a sense of control.
- ▶ Practice calming strategies such as controlled breathing, grounding, self-talk and visualisation that can help you to get through stressful events (please refer to the SARC website for more information). These can be used for appointments, giving birth, parenting and throughout life. There is also a free phone app called 'Mind the Bump' that you might find useful.

Helpful tips during appointments and procedures



- ▶ Tell health workers about your worries.
- ▶ Ask questions about the procedure. For example, why it is needed, what the process will be, who will be in the room and what their role is.
- ▶ Ask if there is a less invasive option.
- ▶ Ask if you can be involved in the procedure so you can feel a sense of control. For example, holding the medical instrument involved.
- ▶ Arrange to have a support person with you and request to have no students or other observers.
- ▶ Arrange a signal for you to pause or slow the procedure if you need to.
- ▶ Arrange practical things that might make you feel safer such as having a sheet to cover your body, curtains to be drawn or doors to be closed/open.
- ▶ Use calming strategies (please refer to the SARC website for more information).

It is important to seek professional help if:

- ▶ you feel anxious, distressed or overwhelmed
- ▶ you have lost your enjoyment of life
- ▶ you are experiencing big changes in behaviour and coping ability
- ▶ you feel at risk of hurting yourself or others.

You can choose to speak to your GP about a referral for a Mental Health Care Plan which will reduce the cost of seeing a professional counsellor.

You are not alone – there is always someone you can talk to.

Remember: *there is nothing wrong with you for feeling the way you do. These feelings and experiences are common reactions to trauma. The important things are to be kind to yourself, find some strategies that will help you to get through, look after your and your baby's health and seek support when you need it.*

Resources and services in WA

Telephone support services

Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline
1800 882 436

PANDA helpline (Post and Antenatal Depression Association)
1300 726 306

Parenting Helpline (Ngala)
08 9368 9368 (Perth)
1800 111 546 (country)

Lifeline Australia
13 11 14

1800RESPECT
1800 737 732

Mental Health Emergency Response Line (MHERL)
1300 555 788 (Perth)
1800 676 822 (Peel)

Rurallink mental health support for people living in rural WA
1800 552 002

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636

The Samaritans Help Line
135 247

Women's Domestic Violence Helpline
9223 1188; 1800 007 339

Sexual Assault Resource Centre
(08) 6458 1828 or Freecall 1800 199 888.

Website services

Sexual Assault Resource Centre
kemh.health.wa.gov.au/our-services/service-directory/sarc

Blue Knot Foundation
blueknotfoundation.org.au

1800RESPECT
1800respect.org.au

PANDA (Post and Antenatal Depression Association)
panda.org.au

The Women's Council
womenscouncil.com.au

Pregnancy, Birth and Baby
pregnancybirthbaby.org.au