

Approach to Trauma

Overview

Trauma can take many forms and our understanding of it continues to grow. Included in the definition of trauma are acute/isolated events, complex series of events spanning years, historical/generational/community trauma, and systemic trauma related to racism or other kinds of bias.

A large number of women have been or will be affected by trauma within their lifetime. According to the CDC,

- 1/4 girls have experienced sexual abuse in childhood
- 1/5 women have experienced rape or sexual assault in their lifetime
- 1/5 women have experienced intimate partner violence

We are also becoming increasingly aware of the prevalence of birth trauma, ranging from symptoms that meet criteria for PTSD to experiences women describe as traumatic that cause them prolonged emotional distress.

- A 2010 study from Australia of 1067 women showed that 45% of women endorsed having a traumatic birth event and 8.9% of women met criteria for PTSD at least once over the course of 3 postpartum assessments¹

We know that patients whose symptoms may not meet criteria for PTSD can still carry the weight of scary and distressing experiences in their minds and in their bodies. This “weight” can significantly impact patients’ daily lives, including the ways in which they access and experience medical care.

Role of OB/GYN Providers

Our duty as providers is to be sensitive to patients’ experiences so that we 1) do not worsen symptoms related to previous traumas and 2) avoid creating or contributing to new traumatic experiences in the medical setting.

In April 2021 The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) released a committee opinion stating that all providers of OBGYN care should adopt a trauma informed approach, defined as “a strengths-based service delivery approach that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both practitioners and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.” Included in the practice of trauma informed care are the following:

- routine screening of patients for previous or ongoing trauma
- making thoughtful choices about language used
- engaging in step-by-step communication with the patient
- consistently checking in with the patient regarding their preferences and comfort level

¹ Alcorn, K. L., O'Donovan, A., Patrick, J. C., Creedy, D., & Devilly, G. J. (2010). A prospective longitudinal study of the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from childbirth events. *Psychological Medicine*, 40(11), 1849–1859. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291709992224>