A systematic review of midwife-led interventions to address post partum post-traumatic stress

Aims

To systematically identify interventions that midwives could introduce to address post-traumatic stress in women following childbirth.

Background

Childbirth is generally viewed as a positive, life-changing event for women and their families. However, this period of time may be one of critical psychological adjustment for women and precipitate the development of mental health problems. PTSD can occur as the result of a birth perceived as traumatic and may impact on women’s ability to cope and parent effectively in the postnatal period. Manifestations of PTSD exhibited in the wake of traumatic childbirth are similar to those shown after PTSD in the general population, but may also be more specific. They may include hinderance of breastfeeding, fear of future childbearing, dysfunctional mother–infant attachment, and sexual avoidance.

Method

A comprehensive search strategy was designed and applied to a number of electronic bibliographic databases using a pre-defined combination of identified search terms.

Inclusion Criteria
- Focus on therapeutic interventions that could be implemented by a midwife in the postpartum period for prevention or management of post-traumatic stress and/or PTSD
- Published between 2002–2012, in English

Exclusion Criteria
- Research with samples consisting exclusively of mothers who had adverse experiences including miscarriages, stillbirths, premature births or infant’s admitted to special care
- Research regarding antenatal or intrapartum interventions, or perinatal interventions with an antenatal component
- Research with a primary focus on postpartum depression, general anxiety/stress, or parental stress
- Focus on interventions beyond the scope of midwifery practice

For primary research RCTs, controlled clinical trials and cohort studies with a control group were considered for inclusion. For secondary research, potentially eligible reviews were those that had a specified search strategy and eligibility criteria.

The methodological quality of original research and reviews was evaluated to assess the risk of bias in individual studies. Primary research studies were evaluated using the levels of evidence framework developed by Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN) (2008) and scored between 1+ and 2+. The methodological quality of the eligible reviews was assessed using a method developed by Smith et al. (2011), categorising reviews as low, medium, or high quality.

Findings

The systematic literature search identified a total of 21,374 papers. A total of 14 papers, comprising of six primary research studies and eight reviews were included in this systematic review.

Original Research - Five RCTs and one quasi-experimental study evaluated the effects of debriefing or counselling interventions on PTSD outcomes. Methodology varied greatly between studies with differences in intervention strategies, sample sizes, inclusion criteria, number of sessions offered, and length of follow up. Midwives, some with specialist training, facilitated the sessions in all studies. The findings of the included original research papers showed varying effects on PTSD measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Type of intervention</th>
<th>Relevant Results</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priest et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Single one-to-one debriefing session within 72hrs of birth</td>
<td>No significant effect on PTSD outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keratani et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Two one-to-one debriefing sessions at 10 days and 10 weeks postpartum</td>
<td>No significant effect on PTSD outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gamble et al. (2005)</td>
<td>Two one-to-one counseling intervention within 72 hours of birth and 4-6 weeks postpartum</td>
<td>Women in the counseling group had significantly lower PTSD total symptom scores at the 3-month follow-up than those in the control group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mead et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Single one-to-one debriefing session held between 1.3-72 months postpartum</td>
<td>Women in the debriefing group had a significantly greater reduction in overall PTSD symptoms at one month post-intervention than those in the comparison group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebile et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Single one-to-one debriefing session held on the second or third day postpartum</td>
<td>Possibility that debriefing had an adverse influence on PTSD outcomes in a subset of women who had experienced more medical intervention during childbirth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stylianos et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Two one-to-one debriefing sessions at 10 days and 10 weeks postpartum</td>
<td>No statistically significant difference in improvement in PTSD scores between groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Two counseling sessions in small groups with 2-3 weeks between sessions</td>
<td>A positive, but non-statistically significant trend towards improvement with a tendency towards lower levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms in the experimental group</td>
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Reviews - The eight included reviews concluded there was insufficient evidence to suggest that debriefing reduces psychological morbidity, and that timing and construction of debriefing are important influencing factors on effectiveness.

Conclusion

No identified intervention can be definitively recommended for use in midwifery practice settings.

Eligible literature is limited by poor quality and significant methodological heterogeneity that prevents a comprehensive synthesis.

The role of the midwife should be to provide mothers with opportunities to discuss their birth experience, if and when they desire, providing an outlet for expression of feelings. Whilst recognising this is not a formal debriefing intervention, midwives should also act as ‘care co-ordinators’ for women, working effectively within a support network which includes other health professionals and agencies, to provide both continuity of care and communication links that will ensure the mother’s well-being.

References