

Birthing alongside fear

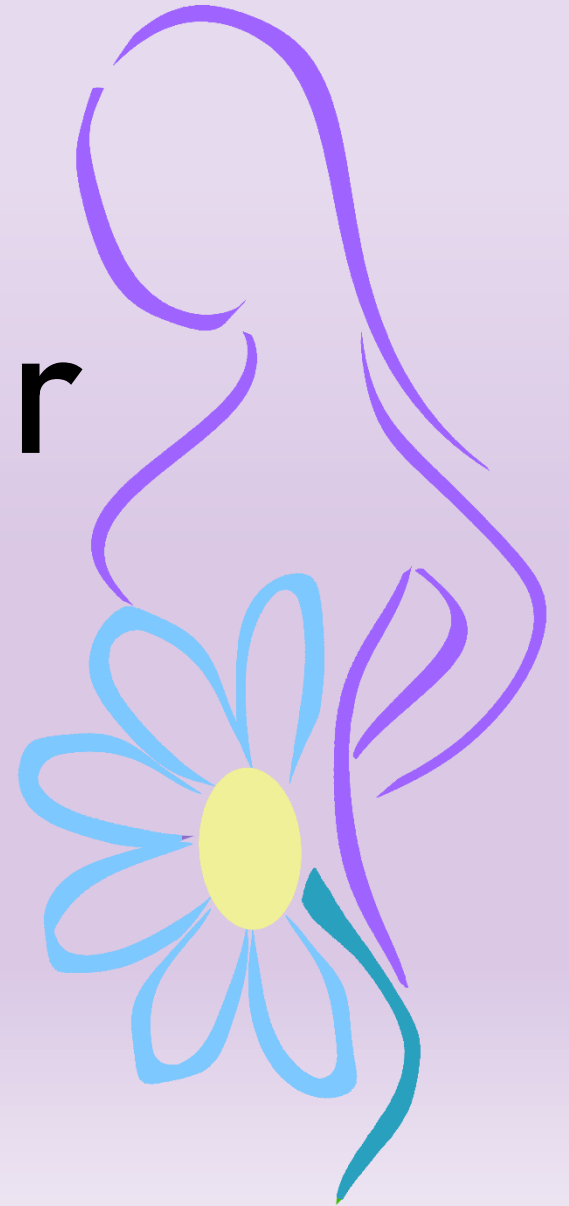
Identifying and working with tokophobia

Dr Lynda Bearman and Emma Connolly

Counselling Psychologist

Psychological Therapist
and Midwife

Essex Perinatal Mental Health Service





Look after yourselves

We've all been parented and some of you may be parents – the statistics and information in this presentation can be hard to hear or potentially link to personal experiences.

We encourage you to look after yourselves.

What is Tokophobia?



- **Tokophobia:** A severe fear of childbirth that is debilitating and has significant impact on functioning
- **Fear of Childbirth:** Anxiety about childbirth that can be viewed as a continuum from mild, likely more common, worries about childbirth to severe fears (tokophobia)

Having some anxiety about childbirth is natural, it is a major life event

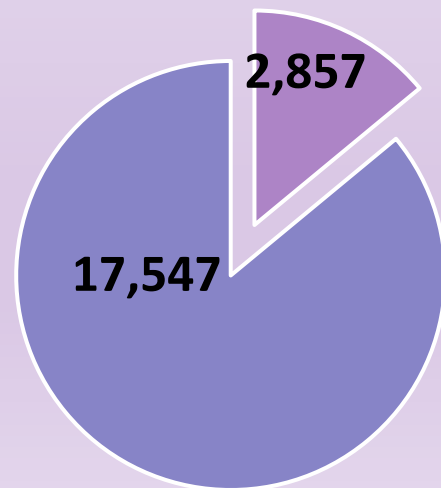
Tokophobia – prevalence and awareness



Research estimates of the prevalence of tokophobia to have huge variation and data frequently skewed by focusing on pregnant samples

“Experienced mental health staff have reflected upon not being aware of Tokophobia prior to working with the perinatal mental health team”

Live Births in Essex - 2021



* Worldwide prevalence rate of 14% as indicated by O’Connell et al (2017)

“I was 67 when I even heard the word tokophobia and then realised that that’s what I’ve been suffering from all my life”

*Tik-Tokophobia:
How Tokophobia
Shapes Your
Mental Health by
Alexia and JJ
(27th May 2025)*

The impact of Tokophobia



Maternal mental health

- 3x more likely to have postnatal depression
- Increased risk of birth-related PTSD
- Physical health risks if struggle to engage fully with maternity care
- Risk to life for mothers and infants can increase after 24 weeks gestation

Infant mental health

- Risks to infant if mother not engaging in maternity care
- Fetal programming research -> increased risk of mental health difficulties themselves
- FoC impacts prenatal and postnatal bonding

“Investing in the emotional wellbeing of our babies is a wonderful way to invest in the future”

1001 Days

Staff and Services

- Non-engagement in maternity care increases likelihood of late disclosure
- Late disclosure increases pressure on services and limits support available
- Vicarious trauma risks

Birth alongside fear



- A resource for psychologically informed birth preferences
- A hope to get individuals help earlier in their pregnancy journey
- A desire to normalise the experience and ensure any birthing person with such fears feel seen, heard and supported



Workbook

- Guided self-help workbook: Birthing alongside fear: How to prepare for birth when you are afraid
- Already utilised in Essex Perinatal Mental Health service

Pathways

- Integrated pathway with MSE hospital, Essex Perinatal Mental Health Service and relevant partner agencies
- Earlier screening for fears of birthing

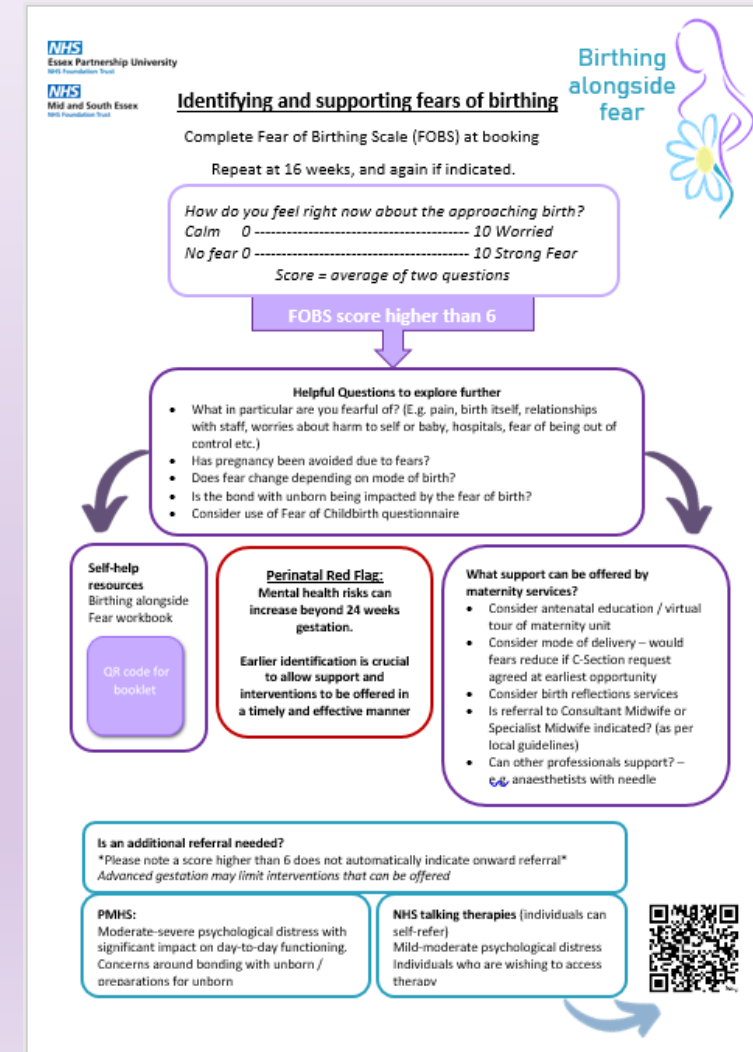
Education

- In-house training with Essex Perinatal Mental Health service completed
- To offer similar education to other services including maternity

Birthing Alongside Fear - Pathway



- Development of a new pathway within MSE maternity services
 - Completion of FOBs at booking, repeat at 16 weeks and again as indicated
 - Score higher than 6 require further exploration
 - What in particular are you fearful of? (E.g. pain, birth itself, relationships with staff, worries about harm to self or baby, hospitals, fear of being out of control etc.)
 - Has pregnancy been avoided due to fears?
 - Does fear change depending on mode of birth?
 - Is the bond with unborn being impacted by the fear of birth?
- Signpost to self-help resources inc. Birthing Alongside Fear Workbook
- Consider support that can be provided by maternity services
- Consider additional referrals as indicated



Birthing alongside fear - guided self-help workbook



Birthing alongside fear

How to prepare for birth when you are afraid.



Written by:
Dr Lynda Bearman and Emma Connolly
Essex Perinatal Mental Health Service

NHS
Essex Partnership University
NHS Foundation Trust

Guided self-help workbook : *Birthing alongside fear: How to prepare for birth when you are afraid.*

- Workbook to be used to help develop psychologically informed birth preferences – giving attention to emotional wellbeing alongside physical wellbeing
- For use alone (as self-help) or with the support of professionals or family
- Fits alongside other interventions as required

“Interventions during pregnancy should include birth preferences which acknowledge and support psychological impact “

- ✓ **Developed with co-production**
- ✓ **Used in Essex Perinatal Mental Health service**
- ✓ **Available online and shared with local services**
- ✓ **Hosted by Pearl Perinatal and London Waiting Room Website**



Birth alongside fear - guided self-help workbook



“The patient said it was helpful as it provided prompts (i.e. as to what they may specifically be worried about)”

“What a wonderful resource for prospective Mums in distress (or any mother-to-be in fact)”

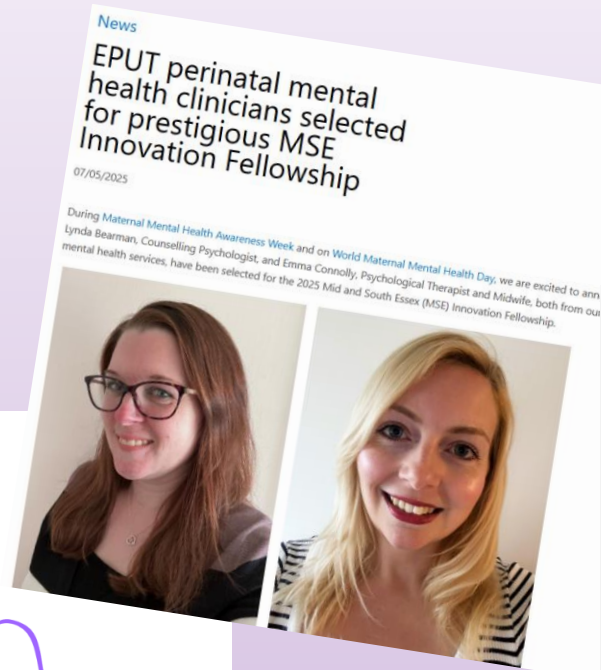
“It’s such a fantastic resource, really well put together and incredibly useful”

“It’s a great example of how psychological practitioners do so much more than 1:1 therapeutic work”

MSE Innovation Fellowship



- Attending The Big Pitch – NHS Clinical Entrepreneur Programme
- Comms
- Links and opportunities to pitch
- Education sessions
- Mentorship



Increasing support for women with tokophobia

17/09/2025

Ensuring safe care for every baby and child is this year's focus for World Patient Safety Day (17 September).

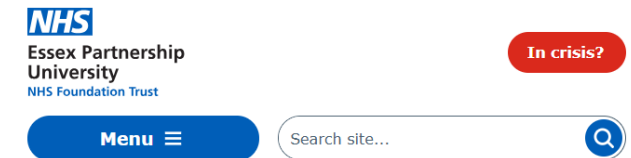
Giving parents and families the right support is just one of the ways in which health organisations can help keep children safe.

Dr Lynda Bearman, Counselling Psychologist, and Emma Connolly, a Psychological Therapist and Midwife, work in our Essex Perinatal Mental Health Service.

They have been working on a project called Birthing Alongside Fear to increase support for women who have tokophobia, a severe fear of childbirth.

These may be fears they have had for a long time, often from childhood, or as a result of a traumatic or difficult experience, such as following a previous traumatic birth.

Emma said: "If people are neurodiverse, or have had a previous traumatic experience, or experienced pregnancy loss or fertility issues, these may also affect their fear."



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Support with fears of birthing

It is common to worry about childbirth when you are pregnant. We can understand these fears on a sliding scale from ordinary fears that many birthing people may experience up to very intense fears of childbirth, known as tokophobia.

Fears can develop from a difficult birthing or medical experience, or can be longstanding and even present from childhood. Some fears of birthing may also relate to other mental health difficulties or personal circumstances.

This [self-help workbook](#) is designed to help those suffering with fears of birthing. It can be used alone, alongside professional support, or the support of friends and family.

Health warning: This workbook contains birthing language and imagery. If this is likely to trigger your anxiety we would recommend you seek support to work through this information slowly.



What's next?



- Continued rollout of the workbook with ambitions for this to be a national resource:
 - Inclusion on Patients Know Best maternity resources
 - Linking with other organisations such as Make Birth Better
 - To have discussions with NHS England and Royal College of Midwives
- Training:
 - Tokophobia Training workshops planned in November / December for Essex NHS Talking Therapies services and Perinatal Services
 - Training for maternity services within the MSE
 - Training with EPUT mental health services
 - E-learning?
- Audits and Evaluation



Any questions?