Support for Birth Trauma Recovery

Eye Movement and Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)
**What is Birth Trauma?**

When we talk of birth trauma, we mean Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that occurs after childbirth. We also include those women who may not meet the clinical criteria for PTSD but who have some of the symptoms of the disorder.

PTSD is the term for a set of normal reactions to a traumatic, scary or bad experience. Common characteristics include:

- An experience involving the threat of death or serious injury to an individual or another person close to them (e.g. their baby).
- A response of intense fear, helplessness or horror to that experience.
- The persistent re-experiencing of the event by way of recurrent intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares. The individual will usually feel distressed, anxious or panicky when exposed to things which remind them of the event.
- Avoidance of anything that reminds them of the trauma. This can include talking about it, although sometimes women may go through a stage of talking of their traumatic experience a lot so that it obsesses them at times.
- Bad memories and the need to avoid any reminders of the trauma, will often result in difficulties with sleeping and concentrating. Sufferers may also feel angry, irritable and be hyper vigilant (feel jumpy or on their guard all the time).

If you are struggling to come to terms with your birth, or any experiencing any of the above symptoms we recommend that you speak to your GP or another healthcare professional as soon as you can. There is support available, and some psychological therapies have been recognised as particularly helpful for treating post-natal Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

**What treatments are available for birth trauma?**

At present, NICE recognises two forms of treatment as appropriate for the management of birth trauma. These are Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (usually abbreviated to CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (usually abbreviated to EMDR). In some cases medication may also be recommended under guidance from your GP.

This leaflet aims to give you information about EMDR. The BTA also produces a leaflet on CBT, which is available from your peer support group leader or online at [www.bta.org.uk](http://www.bta.org.uk)

**What is EMDR?**

EMDR is a form of psychotherapy based on the understanding that the experience of trauma can affect the way in which the brain processes memories. Memories of a traumatic birth can be overwhelming and intense, and women can feel as though they are actually reliving the birth, experiencing the same things that they saw, smelt, felt or tasted. EMDR aims to enable you to revisit your birth trauma in a safe and therapeutic environment and reduce the intensity of these memories so that you no longer relive the experience.

An EMDR therapist will ask you to concentrate your mind on your birth trauma whilst at the same time providing your brain with sensory input, such as asking you to track their moving finger with your eyes. It is thought that recalling memories whilst also receiving this external stimulus enables the brain to change the way in which it processes memories. After a successful course of EMDR treatment you will still remember your birth, but the feeling of reliving your birth and the overwhelming distress that accompanies these memories should leave you.

**What happens in an EMDR session?**
Your therapist will first seek to take a history of your trauma, and understand the full nature of the difficulties you are experiencing. Following this (usually in a different session) your therapist will ask you to choose an image to visualise your trauma, and talk to you about the negative feelings and distress you are experiencing. Still focussing on the visualisation of your trauma, the therapist will draw your attention by asking you to track their finger with your eyes as they move it from left to right. Despite the name, EMDR therapists do not only use eye movements to draw your attention. A therapist may use a combination of guided eye movements, taps and sounds. This will last for only a short time, perhaps 20 seconds. Your therapist will then talk to you again, about the process of remembering you have been through, and talk to you about finding positive thoughts, all the time considering your present and your future, not only the past. This process can be repeated in numerous sessions until you feel released from the distressing intensity of your traumatic memories.

Typically, a course of treatment will comprise 8-12 hour long sessions. You may find that the early sessions in particular are quite distressing as you vividly remember your birth, and it is recommended that you plan a quiet day following your treatment.

**How can I find a therapist?**

If you are under the care of a perinatal psychologist, they may be able to arrange a referral for a course of EMDR. Your GP should also be able to make a referral for you.

Alternatively, you can also book sessions yourself with a private practitioner. It is important to ensure that the therapist you select is appropriately qualified and accredited to deliver EMDR. A professional therapist will never object to you asking questions about these details before you make a booking.

**EMDR Association**

http://www.emdrassociation.org.uk/findatherapist.htm

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

BACP House, 15 St John’s Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire LE17 4HB United Kingdom

www.bacp.co.uk/seeking_therapist/index.html