



**BIRTH  
TRAUMA  
ASSOCIATION**

How do I access  
therapy to help me  
recover from my  
birth trauma?

# Symptoms of birth trauma

If you've been through a traumatic birth you might find yourself experiencing post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms. This is a normal reaction to a distressing situation.

PTS symptoms typically include:

- Re-experiencing parts of the trauma through flashbacks and nightmares
- Hyperarousal, which is a sense of being on high alert and anxious or feeling irritable and angry
- Unwanted thoughts and feelings
- Feeling isolated
- Difficulties sleeping and/or concentrating
- A desire to avoid anything at all that reminds you of your trauma, such as hospitals, clinics, pregnant women or babies



# Symptoms of birth trauma

If you've been through a traumatic birth you might find yourself experiencing post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms. This is a normal reaction to a distressing situation.

You might also:

- Experience guilt and confusion and memory loss
- Find it hard to bond with your baby or to feel close to other people
- Experience “dissociation”, which is feeling disconnected from your own thoughts and feelings. You may feel numb or as if you are disconnected from the things around you



# Birth partners can also experience birth trauma symptoms

Sometimes birth partners develop PTSD or other symptoms of psychological distress after witnessing a traumatic birth.

They may have feared for the health of their partner or baby.

Sometimes partners feel helpless or they may have had to make difficult decisions without the input of their partner.

# What help is available for birth trauma symptoms?

There are two main therapies that have been proven to be effective for treating trauma symptoms. They are both recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

They are:

- Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT)
- Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)

# What do Trauma-focused CBT and EMDR involve?

- Trauma-focused CBT and EMDR are structured therapies, typically lasting for around 8-12 sessions, although a longer course of therapy might be needed for more complex trauma presentations – for example, if you have significant physical injuries, or have had previous traumatic experiences
- When you have PTSD, you frequently relive the trauma, often on a daily basis, which is usually frightening and upsetting and gets in the way of doing the things you care about
- Both therapies help process the trauma memory, so that it becomes a stable long-term memory, that doesn't get easily triggered. Flashbacks and nightmares usually stop and people find that they can remember the event without it making them highly emotional

# What do Trauma-focused CBT and EMDR involve?

- Because both therapies involve processing the memory of the trauma, it is not unusual to experience an increase in trauma symptoms at the start of therapy. Talking or thinking about your traumatic experiences brings them to the forefront of your mind. However, your therapist will teach you ways to manage these symptoms and the short-term increase in symptoms usually resolves fairly quickly and leads to lasting improvements over the long term
- Trauma-focused CBT and EMDR can be emotionally draining and tiring. The timing of therapy is therefore really important. It is best if therapy happens at a time when you feel ready to think about your experiences



# How do I access trauma-focused CBT or EMDR on the NHS?

- Trauma-focused CBT and EMDR are both recommended in the NICE Guidelines for PTSD and so should be available within your area through the NHS
- Ask your GP or health visitor for a referral
- If you're in England, you can self-refer through your local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. Just google the name of your local area and IAPT to find it
- As most NHS services have a waiting list, you may need to wait a number of weeks or months for treatment

# How do I access trauma-focused CBT or EMDR privately?

The three most useful websites for finding private therapists to treat trauma are:

- The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy:  
[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)
- The British Association for Cognitive Behavioural Therapies website:  
[www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)
- The EMDR Association of UK website:  
<https://www.emdrassociation.org.uk>

# How do I access trauma-focused CBT or EMDR privately?

You can also look at the advertisements on the Birth Trauma Association site, <https://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk>

Some private therapists offer video consultations and online therapy, so you don't have to find someone near where you live. Online therapy has been shown to be as effective as face-to-face therapy.

Private therapy costs vary between £40 and £150 a session. Psychologists usually charge more than psychotherapists. Many therapists offer a free consultation, so that you can check that they are a good match for you.

# Are other options available?

The NHS in England is currently setting up specialist maternal mental health services throughout the country that can treat birth trauma. These services are available up to two years after the birth.

These specialist services should all be in place by April 2024, although some have already been established.

You can ask your health visitor if such a service is available in your area.

# Other treatments

Some practitioners offer other therapies to treat birth trauma. At the BTA, we believe therapy to treat birth trauma is best carried out by a qualified therapist or psychologist.

We always recommend trying trauma-focused CBT or EMDR rather than any other treatment because both have a good evidence base.

It is of course up to you to decide whether you want to try another therapy. Some people find the long waits for NHS therapy frustrating.

# Are there more informal forms of support?

- If you would like to chat to one of our birth trauma peer supporters, who have all been through traumatic birth, you can email them at [support@birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](mailto:support@birthtraumaassociation.org.uk) or call them on 0203 621 6338
- You can also ask to join our Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/groups/TheBTA](http://www.facebook.com/groups/TheBTA)
- Partners are also welcome to join our Facebook group or contact our peer supporters
- Fathers can also access support from Dads Matter UK: [www.dadsmatteruk.org](http://www.dadsmatteruk.org)