AIMS For a better birth...

Emotional Freedom Techniques for Obstetric Violence

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By Julia Adams with Pat Ballantyne

As I was planning this article, I read some research from the website'Pregnant then Screwed'.[1] It painted a grim picture of birth trauma endured by thousands of women during the pandemic. The Covid pandemic was an exceptional circumstance, and traumatic for many in numerous ways. It is known that around 30,000 women every year are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a direct and indirect result of their experience of being pregnant and giving birth within the UK maternity care systems.[2] Treatment, as usual, often takes a long time due to long waiting lists. The standard treatment for PTSD - various talking therapies - appear to be ineffective for some people. As I now complete this article, the Ockendon report is in the news, with the business of giving birth in the UK under scrutiny as never before. Both women and the midwifery profession are in need of much more support to deal with the trauma associated with childbirth and family life in general. The need for another safe and effective treatment for traumatic issues has never been greater. Thankfully, it exists and it is called Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), also known as "Tapping" (not to be confused with Emotionally Focused Therapy). EFT techniques are very effective in the hands of qualified professionals[3] [4] [10]yet interestingly, also when used as a self-help technique.[11]

Childbirth for many women involves serious and often persistent traumatisation. It is not just the threat of birth trauma that is worrying for many; one in three women worldwide also experience sexual violence.[5] The long-term effects of a history of sexual violence, can be a contributing factor to women being very sensitive during the perinatal period. It has implications for maternity care with many women experiencing an invasion of their boundaries, if indeed, they attend their appointments at all. Apart from the devastating impact on their physical health, they may suffer long term psychological consequences.[6]

For many women their experience of giving birth stays with them, haunting them and impacting not only their quality of life but also that of their loved ones. Few women would wish their trauma on anyone, let alone their own children, yet the latest studies show that trauma is heritable. Recent research shows that if your parents or their parents experienced trauma then it is possible that somewhere in the DNA, transmission of the imprint of that trauma has passed to their descendants.[7]

Childbirth is a natural process, yet it is not without inherent risks – hence the move towards hospital and

medicalised interventions. We also know the impact of feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed on expectant mothers. Most women would far prefer natural surroundings, natural treatments and to avoid the drugs wherever possible, but to have them available if needed. An over medicalised environment can be disempowering at the very time when a woman wants to feel in control and respected by those around her. Feeling in control and feeling respected is extremely important to outcomes for mother, baby and the wider family. When a woman's boundaries have been violated (her perception is key here, and not the doctor's) attaining a sense of one's own self determinism is an essential part of recovery.

Why is EFT good for Obstetric violence and birth trauma?

EFT is becoming well known as a treatment for trauma and can be particularly effective when the trauma can be identified, as in the case of birth trauma. With EFT the more specific one can be, the more effective the results, but so many people are so traumatised they cannot even begin the process by using words. With mainstream talking therapies, however skilled and experienced the clinician or psychotherapist, the very act of talking about the trauma still forces people to relive it and 'go there'. With EFT, it is not necessary to actually verbalise the issue at first. Indeed, silent tapping with a professional, while focusing on feelings about the issue, will reduce the intensity to a level where the trauma can be more readily engaged with, always using a minimum of words.

Because EFT includes the use of acupoints,[8] the body's own healing processes are being engaged, so the healing is done with the client rather than to them. With EFT the client is in control of the pace and depth of the work at all times. The client is an active partner in their own healing. Many of our cliens tell us that the very gentleness of the EFT process, when compared to other treatment methods they have tried, is the main reason they see their sessions through to completion. Below are anecdotes of how rapid and effective use of EFT can be with women with birth trauma.

A client last year approached me to treat her with EFT for trauma. This client was a psychologist and first-time mother. She was aware that the experience of her own birth experience would have a significant impact on her impending experience of childbirth. She was also aware of the conditions in hospitals and the acute shortage of qualified staff. This did not help her relax into what is the natural process of childbirth. Using EFT, we managed to neutralise the negative experience of her (forceps) delivery rapidly and gently.[9] She went on to have a positive experience, and her son is happy and healthy.

In another anecdote from EFT International's archives 'Carol' was a 32-year old first time mother who presented for therapy two weeks after giving birth. She was traumatised by her birth experience and felt she was unable to bond with her new baby. Carol's mother, who had been present at the birth, accompanied her to her sessions. Her mother agreed that the experience was horrendous, for both her daughter and for her looking on at what happened. At her first session, Carol was shaky, anxious and worried about her inability to bond with her baby. Both Carol and her mother were taught the EFT 'Basic Recipe' at this first session, using Carol's physical symptoms to start, followed by them both addressing the various aspects of the birth experience. Carol's Mum tapped along with Carol and her therapist. At her next session, again accompanied by her mother, Carol was able to easily describe her birth

experience with no intensity whatsoever. Her mother, who had 'borrowed benefits' throughout Carol's EFT experience, also agreed that she was able to describe that it had, indeed, been a difficult birth, however, now, she was unaffected emotionally by the experience.

EFT is valuable in that it is a skill that can be easily taught and used to manage one's own feelings in stressful situations or in between sessions with a professional. With EFT Tapping, women can achieve a sense of calm by themselves, in alien circumstances – which will help both them and their child.

Apart from the usual counselling and psychotherapy approaches, there are two main treatments currently offered to UK sufferers of childbirth trauma – Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR). EFT, or 'Tapping' is now a third option recently recognised by PTSD (UK) as a safe and effective treatment. If someone has PTSD they naturally seek the safest and most effective treatment and if at all possible it should also be gentle. EFT ticks all those boxes, in fact it has shown to be highly effective because of its very gentleness[4] [10]

In our experience clients given a choice have actually preferred it. The UK's quality assurance body The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is aware of EFT's effectiveness in relation to trauma and has called for more research into more diverse populations. Research is ongoing, with over 150 published studies including Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and Meta Analyses showing that it is effective, often when other interventions have failed, and the effects are durable[4] [10]

So what is EFT (Tapping)?

EFT combines the ancient system of Meridians, energy lines in and around the body that were identified by Traditional Chinese Medicine, with more recent models for understanding the psychology and neurobiology of Trauma.[11] Tapping on specifically identified points on their body, an individual is able to reprocess 'stuck' trauma.

The Benefits

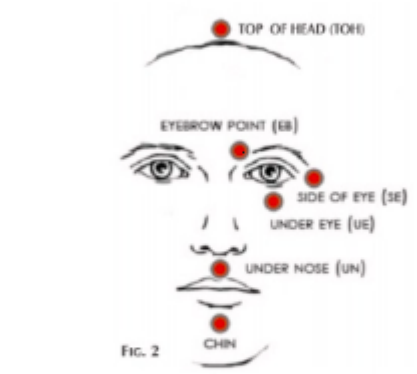
- Fewer sessions are needed for the client to no longer meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.[12]
- The elements of EFT treatment itself make it both gentle and effective. Research found no adverse effects from EFT interventions and showed that it can be used both on a self-help basis and as a primary evidence-based treatment for PTSD.[11]
- After successful discharge, people will have learned valuable coping and stress management skills they can take into their future, not just for their own benefit but for that of their families and friends.

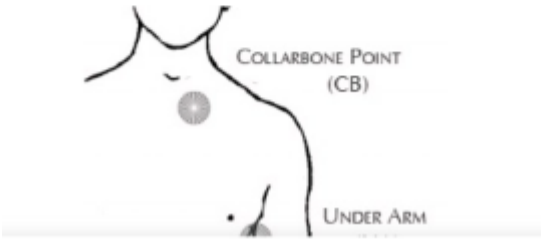
EFT has been described as emotional acupuncture without needles. Indeed, it uses similar points to acupuncture on the face and upper body. Firm pressure is applied by fingers on certain 'Meridian Points'. When tapping on these points a thought, memory, feeling, or a physical symptom associated with a traumatic experience, is brought to mind..

At first, some practitioners like to tap silently with the client, others prefer to listen to the client describing what is going on for them. Some practitioners tap on their clients, others will tap along with their clients, demonstrating where the clients should tap. While tapping, the client is encouraged to repeat a 'reminder' phrase out loud, which helps them stay focussed on the issue being worked on. Depending on what they are told, the practitioner will follow 'what comes up' for the client in the session. Each round of tapping takes less than a minute. The information the client receives from their body during their session is essential to the processing of the 'stuck' trauma. The information coming from the client tells the practitioner where the session needs to go – with the client's permission of course! The information the client supplies may seem irrelevant to an outsider; however, if this is what the client's subconscious is providing, the EFT practitioner is trained to follow it as far as the client will allow. The client is able to access subconscious memories, sensations and feelings that help direct the practitioner to address the event being resolved.

Map of the tapping points







Can I tap by myself at home?

EFT Tapping can indeed be done alone. It can be wonderfully empowering to be able to achieve a sense of calm for oneself, to begin to damp down that hyperarousal and get some rest. There are many apps, YouTube videos, and 'Tap along' videos available to follow and whilst getting used to the process. Tapping can be used to manage one's feelings 'in the moment', to help achieve a sense of calm prior to performing a relaxation process (including going to sleep), for managing one's anxiety about an upcoming event, or simply to take the edge off one's feelings after a tough day. It should be said, however, that this activity should really fall into the category of self-care. For EFT to treat trauma effectively, it is best to work with an experienced practitioner with training specific to trauma, with tapping on oneself used in between sessions. By all means take your time to select someone you feel is a good fit for you and who has a lot of experience working with trauma.

For more information on EFT go to PTSD UK page here.[13]

And here is a link to a list of accredited EFT professionally qualified practitioners.[14]

Author Bios:

Julia Adams - Julia found the EFT was the only thing that worked to help her cope with her son was an infant. Now qualified in EFT Julia, Julia draws on her deep understanding of the subtle nuances of language, when tapping with clients. This proves very useful when unearthing hidden patterns and core beliefs. Julia believes in gently holding space for women while they overcome their traumas. Julia believes that gently 'holding space' for women while they tap to overcome their traumas provides the best context for women to rediscover their uniquely feminine power to live and heal.

Pat Ballantyne - Pat was awarded her BPsych in Australia, where she also learned EFT in 1999 In 2003 she returned to the UK and has used EFT professionally ever since. Pat also works with the NHS and is chair of the EFTi research team, whose mission is for EFT to be accepted as a mainstream therapy.

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[9] Described in more detail here: https://eftinternational.org/eft-for-pregnancy-and-birth

[10] EFT INternational (2022) EFT Tapping is Supported by a Large and Growing Body of Scientific Research

https://eftinternational.org/discover-eft-tapping/eft-science-research

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