

APPENDIX L INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Explaining EMDR.

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR for short) is a relatively new therapy – established within the last 10 – 15 years. It is an extremely effective treatment for people – children, young people, and adults – who have had traumatic experiences.

It can also help with a variety of emotional and behavioural problems.

There is a wealth of information about current research available on the World Wide Web. This leaflet answers the questions most frequently asked by parents and young people.

How does trauma affect us?

Everyone has traumatic experiences during their lives. The effects can be physical, psychological, or a mixture of the two. Some of us recover quickly, some do not. Sometimes the effects of a trauma can stay with us and effects of the trauma can stay with us and affect our lives long after the event. Specialist help may be needed to aid recovery.

The effects on children and young people.

Sometimes the traumas a child experiences are easy to see – death, or a road traffic accident, for example. But it is not always that easy.

Sometimes *you* know what they are, but your child does not. The traumas may have taken place so early in life that they are not remembered or the child may have pushed them out of mind or “forgotten” them.

When children do not remember they often show the effects through their behaviour. For example they may not laugh, play or smile much. They may be *too* obedient and willing to go with any adult. They may be unable to stand up for themselves or protest when badly treated.

Sometimes, parents know something is very wrong but are not aware that anything traumatic has happened.

Emotional stuck points can also be caused by experiences that are traumatic. Often reasons are less clear-cut than they are with specific traumas. Emotional stuck points often underlie difficulties such as depression, anxiety, anger, non-cooperation or antisocial behaviour such as lying and stealing.

EMDR can be used to help with all of the things mentioned in this section. It can also help to improve a person’s self-esteem and ability to cope. It can be effective with children as young as two years old, with older children and teenagers, as well as with older people.

Why is traumatic experience so special?

This seems to have something to do with the way the brain processes information when traumas occur.

Let’s think first about how ordinary memories are formed. Usually, when something happens, your eyes, ears and other senses are the first to respond. This body information is sent to the brain, which records and processes it. The information is stored as memories. These usually have a story-like quality, and contain your impressions and interpretations as well as facts about what happened.

When something dangerous happens, your body and brain respond in a different way. Your body recognises the emergency and takes protective action. Its messages to the brain seem to be put into an emergency store, often without going through the

normal memory processing. These experiences – with the original pictures, sounds, thoughts and feels – are recorded in your brain in raw, unprocessed form. Sometimes they do not get processed by the brain to form ordinary memories in the normal way. They are even stored in a different part of the brain.

How are traumatic memories different?

Traumatic memories seem to become locked into the brain in their “raw” form. When these memories are recalled, they can be very upsetting. Sometimes they can be recalled out of the blue, causing flashbacks, nightmares and outbursts. They can make it very difficult to deal with ordinary stressful situations in the calm and reasonable way that we normally would.

How can EMDR help?

EMDR is an approach that seems to help unblock the brain’s processing, so that traumatic memories can become “ordinary” memories. We do not know precisely how this treatment works. It may have something to do with the alternating left-right stimulation of the brain – or with REM sleep, in which the eyes often move from side to side on their own. The eye movements may help to process the unconscious material.

What does EMDR involve?

EMDR involves asking the child or young person to think about the upsetting events, and to look at my finger. I move my finger from side to side for about 15 to 30 seconds. I use other type of left-right stimulation such as hand taps or drumming if a child finds eye movement difficult. After a few seconds of eye movement or other right-left stimulation, I stop and ask the child/teenager to take a deep breath, let go of the image, and rest. Then I would ask what comes up next in his or her

mind. Typically something shifts and the child reports a new image, thought, feeling, or physical sensation. I’ll then ask him or her to hold this in mind and follow another set of eye movements, hand taps or sounds. Some times upsetting thoughts and feelings come up and need to be dealt with. The procedure continues (unless the child/teenager gives the STOP signal – see below) until the event no longer seems upsetting to the child.

Feeling safe.

When upsetting experiences and feelings are being worked with, it is very important the child or young person feels safe and in control at all times. I always set up a “safe place” with him or her before we start to use EMDR to work on upset feelings or memories. This procedure involves the child imagining a place where he or she feels safe and happy, and using eye movements to install a strong image of this. This safe place is a relaxation technique. It can be a refuge for the child during EMDR or between sessions at any time.

The stop signal.

This gives the child/young person control, and helps him or her feel safe. I ask the child to raise a hand if they want to stop. This signals that I must stop **immediately**. I tell the child that it is important to remember “it is your own brain that will be doing the healing and you are the one in control”.

Finally

The information given here does not replace the advice given by your therapist. Please discuss it with your therapist, who will be able to give you more detailed information.