

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

What is it?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is an extensively researched, effective psychotherapy method proven to help people recover from trauma and other distressing life experiences, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and panic disorders.

EMDR therapy does not require talking in detail about the distressing issue or completing homework between sessions. EMDR therapy, rather than focusing on changing the emotions, thoughts, or behaviors resulting from the distressing issue, allows the brain to resume its natural healing process.

EMDR therapy is designed to resolve unprocessed traumatic memories in the brain. For many people, EMDR therapy can be completed in fewer sessions than other psychotherapies.

Our brains have a natural way to recover from traumatic memories and events. This process involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm signal for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists with learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the prefrontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion). While many times traumatic experiences can be managed and resolved spontaneously, they may not be processed without help.

Stress responses are part of our natural fight, flight, or freeze instincts. When distress from a disturbing



event remains, the upsetting images, thoughts, and emotions may create feelings of being overwhelmed, of being back in that moment, or of being “frozen in time.” EMDR therapy helps the brain process these memories and allows normal healing to resume. The experience is still remembered, but the fight, flight, or freeze response from the original event is resolved.

Who it is designed for

EMDR is designed for people who experience:

- Anxiety, panic attacks, and phobias
- Chronic Illness and medical issues
- Depression and bipolar disorders
- Dissociative disorders
- PTSD and other stress-related issues
- Sexual assault trauma
- Eating disorders
- Grief and loss
- Sleep disturbance
- Substance abuse and addiction

How it works

After the therapist and person served agree that EMDR therapy is a good fit, the individual will be

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asked to focus on a specific event. Attention will be given to a negative image, belief, and body feeling related to this event, and then to a positive belief that would indicate the issue was resolved.

While the person focuses on the upsetting event, the therapist will begin sets of side-to-side eye movements, sounds, or taps. The client will be guided to notice what comes to mind after each set. They may experience shifts in insight or changes in images, feelings, or beliefs regarding the event.

The client has full control to stop the therapist at any point if needed. The sets of eye movements, sounds, or taps are repeated until the event becomes less disturbing.

A typical EMDR therapy session lasts from 60-90 minutes. EMDR therapy may be used within a standard talking therapy, as an adjunctive therapy with a separate therapist, or as a treatment by itself.

There are eight phases to EMDR therapy: initial history discovery and treatment planning, preparation, assessment, desensitization, installation, body scan, closure, and reevaluation.

Why it is done

The goal of EMDR therapy is to process completely the experiences that are causing problems, and to include new ones that are needed for full health.

“Processing” does not mean talking about it. “Processing” means setting up a learning state that will allow experiences that are causing problems to be “digested” and stored appropriately in your brain. That means that what is useful to you from an experience will be learned, and stored with appropriate emotions in your brain, and be able to guide you in positive ways in the future.

The inappropriate emotions, beliefs, and body sensations will be discarded. Negative emotions, feelings and behaviors are generally caused by unresolved earlier experiences that are pushing you in the wrong directions. The goal of EMDR therapy is

to leave you with the emotions, understanding, and perspectives that will lead to healthy and useful behaviors and interactions.

Although EMDR therapy may produce results more rapidly than previous forms of therapy, speed is not the issue and it is important to remember that every person has different needs. For instance, one individual may take weeks to establish sufficient feelings of trust (Phase 2), while another may proceed quickly through the first six phases of treatment only to reveal something even more important that needs treatment.

Results/Benefits

More than 30 positive controlled outcome studies have been done on EMDR therapy. Some of the studies show that 84%-90% of single-trauma victims no longer have post-traumatic stress disorder after only three 90-minute sessions. Another study, funded by the HMO Kaiser Permanente, found that 100% of the single-trauma victims and 77% of multiple trauma victims no longer were diagnosed with PTSD after only six 50-minute sessions. In another study, 77% of combat veterans were free of PTSD in 12 sessions. There has been so much research on EMDR therapy that it is now recognized as an effective form of treatment for trauma and other disturbing experiences by organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, the World Health Organization and the Department of Defense. Given the worldwide recognition as an effective treatment of trauma, one may see how EMDR therapy would be effective in treating the “everyday” memories that are the reason people have low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and all the myriad problems that bring them in for therapy.

Over 100,000 clinicians throughout the world use the therapy. Millions of people have been treated successfully over the past 25 years.

Sources: emdria.org, emdr.com