

EMDR

EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITISATION AND REPROCESSING

A Brief Introduction

What is EMDR used for?

EMDR is used to treat a wide range of issues which people bring to counselling. These include:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Trauma (resulting from accidents, disasters, distress)
- Anxiety – including panic attacks and phobia
- Emotional distress
- Eating disorders
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of confidence

It is used either on its own or in combination with traditional counselling or psychotherapy.

What is EMDR?

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) is a very effective psychological treatment developed in the US during the 1980's by Dr. Francine Shapiro. Its first use was in treating Vietnam war veterans who had suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Although it was originally used to treat PTSD, it is now widely used to help people overcome many other conditions — phobias, anxiety (and panic) attacks, bereavement, loss and pain. It can also help with past experiences which are still having a negative impact on a person's day to day life.

EMDR is a non-drug, non-hypnotic psychotherapy technique. It is non-directive, client-led and always remains within the control of the client.

How well regarded is EMDR?

According to Dr. David Servan-Schreiber, a leading US psychiatrist, writing in *The Times* (22 May 2004), "A few sessions of EMDR are often enough to clear out the consequences of old sufferings I do not know of any treatment in psychiatry, including the most powerful drugs, that has reported results of this magnitude over three weeks."

Dr. Servan-Schreiber has written at length about EMDR in his book *Healing without Freud and Prozac* (2004: London, Rodale).

EMDR, now probably the most extensively researched treatment for trauma and anxiety, has been recommended by The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) since 1995 as a treatment of choice in the NHS.

What's the theory behind EMDR?

EMDR is based on the theory that traumatic events — which Dr. Shapiro describes as either "big T" traumas (like a serious car accident) or "little t" traumas (like a negative comment made by a teacher at school) — are stored in isolation in the brain where they cannot be made sense of. They are, in effect, frozen in time. EMDR uses eye movements and other simple methods to stimulate both sides of the brain alternately. This process appears to release the trapped memories of experiences, physical feelings, images, emotions — even smells and sounds — so that they can be processed as ordinary memories.

How does it help to bring up painful memories?

We tend to avoid painful memories and if we do this they keep their disturbing power. They can unexpectedly, and sometimes frighteningly, affect our behaviour in the present. With EMDR you can face the memory in a safe setting, so that you do not feel overwhelmed. This enables you to move on while the memory and emotions fade into the past.

Who can provide EMDR?

EMDR treatment can only be used by professional clinicians who have been specifically trained in its use. It isn't suitable for everyone.

Does EMDR work?

There are various theories about how EMDR works, and at present no one is entirely sure what changes take place in the brain which reduce the pain of a memory. One theory is that the movement of the eyes in EMDR is similar to that which occurs during dreaming, speeding up the client's ability to move through the healing process. As with other types of therapy, there are no guarantees as to success, but in general, the process tends to produce positive results more quickly than conventional counselling and is effective even with traumas or negative experiences which have taken place many years in the past.

How do I know if EMDR is for me?

EMDR therapy begins in the same way as other forms of psychological treatment, such as counselling, that is, with a full assessment of the problems you are dealing with. During the first few sessions we explore the history of the difficulties you are having, the events which gave rise to them (if these are known), when the problems began, what triggers them and so on. I explain how EMDR works and assess whether or not it will suit you. The next stage is to provide you with resources, such as focussed breathing, to help you relax. By the time EMDR begins, you will be fully briefed, be able to give informed consent to treatment and will feel relaxed and therefore able to engage with the process.

What happens in a session?

You are asked to focus on a specific upsetting event or image, seeing it in your mind's eye, with its associated thoughts and emotions. Then bilateral stimulation with eye movements or alternating taps or sound beeps begins. In my practice, I use a "light bar" which features a row of small lights which I ask you to track visually from side to side or horizontally.

In certain circumstances we might use bilateral sounds via headphones or bilateral taps of the hands from a small hand-held device. You can speak as much or as little about the incident as you like and you do not need to tell me the details unless you want to. From time to time, we pause so that we can check progress and this helps to guide the process. All you need to do is to help me to understand the circumstances or setting of the events which are troubling you and help me track any changes as we go, whether emotional, physical or in imagination, but there is no need for you to tell me the nature of any such changes.

The processing of the specific event or image ends when, after repeated visualisation of the image, you can view it as an ordinary memory. Often clients report that the memory seems to have "faded into the past" or "lost its power".

We may use EMDR alone, or combine it with other therapy approaches, according to your needs and preferences.

What is the advantage of EMDR over traditional talking therapies?

Whilst it would be wrong to say that EMDR is a “quick fix”, there seems no doubt that, in most cases, it produces positive results much faster than traditional counselling or psychotherapy. Sometimes, just a single session of EMDR can lay to rest an emotional issue which has had a long-lasting impact on a person. In other cases, it can take much longer, but a change seems normally to begin take place within a session or two.

In my practice, I often use EMDR in combination with counselling or psychotherapy to address a specific issue which is not responding or with which the client feels “stuck” in some way. For instance, a client may say, “I now *understand* why I feel like this, but I still feel like it!”. EMDR can be effectively targeted at dispelling that feeling.

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