

EMDR

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing A Fast, Effective New Treatment for Anxiety, Stress and Trauma

What is EMDR?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a powerful new method of doing psychotherapy. EMDR has helped over half a million people of all ages relieve many different types of psychological distress.

How was EMDR developed?

In 1987, psychologist Francine Shapiro made a chance discovery that lateral eye movements can reduce the intensity of disturbing thoughts under certain conditions. Dr. Shapiro studied these effects scientifically and, in 1989, she reported success in using EMDR to treat victims of trauma in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. Since then, EMDR has developed and evolved through the contributions of therapists and researchers all over the world. Today, EMDR is a set of protocols that incorporate elements from many different treatment approaches.

How does EMDR work?

No one knows exactly how EMDR works. However, we do know that when a person is very upset, their brain cannot process information as it does normally. One moment becomes "frozen in time," and remembering a trauma may feel as bad as going through it the first time because the images, sounds, smells, body sensations, and feelings have not changed. A person can try to forget about the traumatic event, but objects, places or situations that remind the person of the trauma can "trigger" a "flashback." Such traumatic memories have a lasting negative effect on the way a person sees the world and relates to other people and interfere with his or her life.

EMDR seems to have a direct effect on the way that the brain functions. Normal information processing is resumed, so following a successful EMDR session, the images, sounds, and feelings no longer are relived when the event is brought to mind. What happened is still remembered, but it is less upsetting. The alternating left-right eye movements accelerate this emotional healing process more rapidly than other means. What happens during EMDR appears to be similar to what naturally occurs during dreaming or the REM (rapid eye movement) stage of sleep. When a person is traumatized, their sleep is often disrupted by nightmares that cause them to wake up in a cold sweat. Because the person wakes up with the nightmare, the normal sleep processes which allow us to "get over" unpleasant events is interrupted. In EMDR, the person is already awake, so this healing process can be followed through until the traumatic event is no longer upsetting. Because the emotions connected to the trauma have lost their intensity, the person no longer has upsetting flashbacks when memory triggers occur. The eye movements accelerate this process tremendously.

Does EMDR really work?

A number of scientific studies have shown that EMDR is extraordinarily effective. In one study, 85% of victims of a single rape were relieved of all flashbacks in just one to three 90-minute EMDR sessions. Under traditional forms of therapy, flashbacks can be triggered many years after the initial trauma and the rape victim may remain unable to function normally in some areas of his or her life. In a study published in the prestigious *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology* in 1985 by Wilson, Becker, and Tinker, 80 subjects with post-traumatic stress improved significantly with EMDR treatment, and further studies showed that this beneficial effect was maintained for at least 15 months. The findings from this and other studies indicate that EMDR is highly effective and that results are long lasting. For further references, a bibliography of research on EMDR may be obtained through EMDRIA: (EMDR International Association; P.O. Box 140824; Austin, Texas 78714-0824; (512) 302-9943; FX (512) 451-0329; E-Mail emdria@aol.com).

What is the actual EMDR session like?

During EMDR, the therapist works with the client to identify a specific problem to be the focus of a treatment session. The client calls to mind the disturbing issue or event, what was seen, felt, heard, thought, etc., and what thoughts and beliefs are currently held about the event. The therapist performs sets of eye movements while the client focuses on the disturbing material, and the client notices whatever comes to mind without making any effort to control direction or content. Each person will process information uniquely, based upon personal experiences and values. It is important to understand that *there is no way for the client to do EMDR incorrectly!* Sets of eye movements are continued until the memory becomes less disturbing and is associated with positive thoughts and beliefs about oneself; for example: "I did the best I could." During EMDR the client may experience intense emotions, but by the end of the session most people report a great reduction in the level of distress.

How long does EMDR take?

One or more sessions are required for the therapist to understand the nature of the problem and to decide whether EMDR is an appropriate treatment. The therapist also will discuss EMDR more fully and provide an opportunity to answer any questions about the method. Once the therapist and client have agreed that EMDR is appropriate for a specific problem, the actual EMDR therapy can begin. One of the factors that seem to predict the effectiveness of EMDR is the level of trust that the therapist and client have in each other. The client needs to trust the therapist enough to honestly report their thoughts, feelings, and sensations during the EMDR session, and the therapist needs to trust that the client will follow through on his or her instructions. A typical EMDR session lasts about 90 minutes. The type of problem, life circumstances, and the amount of previous trauma will determine how many treatment sessions are necessary. A single session of EMDR is sufficient in some cases. However, a typical course of treatment is 3 to 10 sessions, performed weekly, or every other week. EMDR may be used with standard "talking" therapy, as an adjunctive therapy with a separate therapist, or as a treatment all by itself.

What kinds of problems can EMDR treat?

Scientific research has established EMDR as effective for posttraumatic stress. However, clinicians have reported success in using EMDR in treatment of the following conditions:

- Posttraumatic stress
- Panic attacks
- Dissociative disorders
- Sexual and / or physical abuse
- Complicated grief
- Addictions
- Nightmares
- Phobias
- Performance anxiety
- Stress reduction
- Disturbing memories
- Anxiety disorders
- Chronic pain
- Attachment disorders

How old do you have to be to benefit from EMDR?

EMDR has been used successfully for all ages. The techniques have been adapted and are quite effective for children as young as 2 years old, and is likewise effective for seniors.

Does insurance cover EMDR?

Most insurance policies cover EMDR as a form of psychotherapy, however some policies may exclude it. Most insurance policies only cover a 45-50 minute session and do NOT cover a 90 minute session that is often necessary for the processing of intense memories or trauma. You may be responsible for the charges for the second 45 minute session if you and your therapist decide that 90 minutes sessions are necessary.