

EMDR - Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

What is EMDR

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

How was EMDR Developed?

In 1987, psychologist Dr. Francine Shapiro made the chance observation that eye movements can reduce the intensity of disturbing thoughts under certain conditions. Dr. Shapiro studied this effect scientifically and, in 1989, she reported success 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 ordinarily. 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, and feelings haven't changed. Such memories have a lasting negative effect on the way a person sees the world and relates to other people that interferes 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. Many types of therapy have similar goals. However, EMDR appears to be similar to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Therefore, EMDR can be thought of as a physiologically based therapy that helps a person see disturbing material in a new and less distressing way.

But does EMDR REALLY work?

A number of scientific studies have shown that EMDR is effective, for example, the prestigious *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* published research by Wilson, Becker, and Tinker in December 1995. This study of 80 subjects with post-traumatic stress demonstrated that clients improved significantly with EMDR treatment, and further study 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.

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 currently are held about that event. The therapist facilitates by directional movement of the eyes or other bilateral stimulation of the brain while the client focuses on the disturbing material, and the client just notices whatever comes to mind without

making any effort to control direction or content. Each person will process information uniquely, based on personal experience 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 thought 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 disturbance.

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 therapist and client have agreed that EMDR is appropriate for a specific problem, the actual EMDR therapy can begin.

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 within a standard "talk-ing" therapy, as an adjunctive therapy with a separate therapist, or as a treatment all by itself.

What kind of problems can EMDR treat?

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

- Posttraumatic Stress
- Phobias/panic Attacks
- Performance Anxiety
- Dissociative Disorders
- Stress Reduction
- Sexual and/or Physical Abuse
- Disturbing Memories
- Complicated Grief
- Anxiety Disorders
- Addictions

Does insurance cover EMDR?

If your policy covers standard psychotherapy it most likely will cover EMDR. Currently, the EMDR International Association (EMDRIA) is working towards establishing a specific EMDR code for insurance reimbursement.