

A Guide to EMDR



Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)

If something traumatic has happened to you (whether it be a car accident, abuse or something seemingly less significant like being humiliated), the memory of your experience may come crashing back into your mind, forcing you to relive the original event with the same intensity of feeling - like it is taking place in the present moment.

These experiences that pop into your awareness may present themselves as either flashbacks or nightmares, and are thought to occur because the mind was simply too overwhelmed during the event to process what was going on. If enough of these events throughout life are not processed, or the event itself is so traumatic, the mind can become overloaded leading to mental breakdown or self-harm as a defence mechanism.

As a result, these unprocessed memories and the accompanying sights, sounds, thoughts and feelings are stored in the brain in 'raw' form, where they can be accessed each time we experience something that triggers a recollection of the original event. While it isn't possible to erase these memories, the process of Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR) can alter the way these traumatic memories are stored within the brain - making them easier to manage and causing you far less distress - if any at all. The treatment is suitable for both Adults and Children, who are even more susceptible to the quick acting positive effects of EMDR.

What is EMDR?

EMDR is a form of psychotherapy developed in the 1980s by American psychologist Francine Shapiro. During a stroll in the park, Shapiro made a chance observation that certain eye movements appeared to reduce the negative emotion associated with her own traumatic memories. When she experimented, she found that others also exhibited a similar response to eye movements, and so she set about conducting controlled studies before developing a multiphase approach to trauma reduction.

Today, the treatment is used to treat a wide range of psychological difficulties that typically originate in trauma, such as direct or indirect experiences of violence, accidents or natural disaster. EMDR is also used to treat more prolonged, low-grade distress that originates in shock or loss and/or issues experienced during childhood.

The experiences outlined above often lead to a post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, for which EMDR has been recommended by the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE), The World Health Organisation & the American Psychiatric Association, and Government Defence and Veterans departments. Anyone however, suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress (you do not have to be diagnosed as having a Disorder) will benefit from EMDR treatment.

Increasingly, EMDR treatment is also being widely and successfully used as the go to treatment for other issues including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Phobias and Fears
- Stress
- Bereavement
- Addictions
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorders
- Low self-esteem
- Body Dysmorphia

Reported benefits of EMDR include:

- A reduction in re-experiencing trauma memories.
- Feeling more able to cope with and manage traumatic memories without needing to avoid potential triggers.
- Feeling more able to engage in and enjoy pleasurable activities and relationships.
- Reduced feelings of stress, anxiety, irritation and hypervigilance - allowing you to rest well, address pressure and/or conflict and go about your daily business without feeling fearful and prone to panic.
- Reduced feelings of isolation, hopelessness and depression.
- A boost in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- A feeling of no longer being bothered about the past and thereby effectively forgetting about previous traumatic events rather than the treatment erasing them - the effect however is the same.

How does EMDR work?

When traumatic events occur, the body's natural cognitive and neurological coping mechanisms can be overwhelmed and subsequently the memory is inadequately processed and stored in an isolated network.

The goal of EMDR treatment is to replicate REM Sleep whilst awake, to properly process these traumatic memories, reducing their impact and helping clients to develop coping mechanisms. This is done through a four-phase approach to address the past, present, and future aspects of a stored memory, requiring clients to recall distressing events safely while receiving bilateral sensory input – rapid side to side eye movements (as if in REM Sleep).

If you are unable to maintain focus or experience sight loss bilateral stimulation can also be achieved by sound or your therapist tapping your hands or legs.

The recalled memories are then Desensitised which allows new neurological pathways to form, effectively Reprocessing the emotional attachment to the event.

What can I expect from an EMDR therapy session?

The goal of EMDR is simple - "to reduce distress in the shortest period of time using a comprehensive approach with therapeutic protocols and procedures". There are traditionally eight phases to EMDR therapy but these can now be shortened safely to just 4 simple phases, reducing treatment time and cost, which typically adhere to the following format for Adults, while fictional magical analogies are used with Children:

During the initial phase your EMDR therapist will ask you about your history, including what kind of symptoms or distress you are experiencing, whether or not you are taking any medication, have any addictions or OCD's, and what kind of support you are already receiving. Getting to know you in this way will help your therapist determine whether or not EMDR is the best course of action for you. This can take place in the first session or over the phone in a telephone consultation, speeding up the process of recovery and saving valuable in session time for actual treatment rather than discovery.

Before EMDR treatment begins, your therapist will talk you through the second phase of the Theory and Discovery, by asking and answering any questions you may have. Eye Movement will be tested. At this point your therapist will relax you with simple breathing techniques, then work with you to Mind Map all the memories and distressing locked in thoughts within your mind, rather like unravelling a ball of rubber bands.

The process is completely non-verbal (it's not counselling) allowing you to safely and quickly label any and all events without fear or feelings of shame or guilt. EMDR is unique in that it is non-verbal throughout and therefore suitable for conditions such as ADD, ADHD and Asperger's, and particularly children who would find it hard to express feelings about abuse, loss, stress & anxiety. Once the mind has been mapped your therapist will work with you to plan how the next phase can be shortened further, to again further reduce treatment time and cost, getting you to a place of wellbeing fast, and within that same season. Each memory is then graded according to the scale of Subject Units of Distress (SUD's). This becomes the benchmark for the treatment.

At this the third phase, you will now target the specific distressing memories identified in the Mind Mapping with eye movements. To start with you will be asked to select an image to represent the event and then to focus on the amount of distress (SUD's) you feel and where you feel it in your body. This isolates and reconfirms the level of anxiety. Your therapist may help you to focus further with imaginative therapies if needed to ensure the feelings are those of anxiety. Then your therapist will use bilateral eye movements until your distress has cleared (or is reduced as much as possible) and you are experiencing more positive thoughts and feelings. The process is then repeated until issues are resolved in that or subsequent sessions. A competent therapist will be able to treat 10-15 separate issues in just 1 session, again reducing treatment time and cost.

The fourth phase is Re-evaluation which will take place in the session and is effectively the first step in your next session. This phase will see you and your therapist working together to consider how you are coping and whether or not you need to address the same memory as last time or if you are able to move on to something different.

How will I feel after my session?

The nature of EMDR means that after your session the treatment will continue to be active in your awareness. This means that the effects of the treatment will continue to work deepening the resolution and feelings of positivity. While everyone is different, over a short period of time (24-48 hours) these feelings will generally become far less intense although many people say they feel a strong sense of relief immediately in or after their sessions. This is one of the unseen phenomenal benefits of EMDR where Post Traumatic Stress turns into Post Traumatic Growth, where positive behaviours emerge.

It is common to feel tired shortly after the treatment and you should ensure you have a safe place (more than often at home) to rest, and if required to allow yourself to sleep. This sleep can often be highly restful and deep, as the mind continues to heal. It is commonly reported you will awake feeling refreshed and even more positive.

Is EMDR a kind of hypnosis?

EMDR is not considered a form of hypnosis (which is a therapy not a treatment) but often Clinical Hypnotherapy can be used highly effectively to facilitate EMDR in cases where traumatic memories exist but cannot be recalled. Often very disturbing experiences become locked in but out of conscious thought when the mind enters a hypnoidal state. These events cannot be mapped in the second phase but Clinical Hypnosis can safely access these very deep routed subconscious memories in order to then resolve them with EMDR. Combining these powerful protocols can achieve long lasting and deep routed positive change. You will remain fully conscious and aware at all times during your session and you will have total control over what is happening.

EMDR in conclusion is safe, fast acting, highly effective, and suitable for adults and children. This is why EMDR is rapidly becoming the clinician's choice of medical treatment for the swift effective resolution of mental health issues.



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