

Keep Valued Employees through Performance Enhancement Counseling

By Jeff Dwarshuis LMSW, ACSW

All people have difficult times and employees at all levels of leadership will carry stress to the workplace. The result can be a less than optimal performance. Employees can be stressed by financial hardship, marital discord, parenting or past issues of divorce, family loss, bereavement or child abuse. All can dramatically impact an employee's work performance.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment that can quickly and effectively assist with workplace stress. EMDR has its beginnings as a treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and has been very effective with performance, depression and anxiety as well. Created by psychologist Francine Shapiro PhD, EMDR uses a blend of cognitive, emotive and client centered therapies in combination with neurobiological interventions. Since its beginning in 1995, EMDR has dramatically changed the lives of thousands of people.

EMDR, REM and Memory Reprocessing

To understand EMDR it is helpful to first know about the impact of Rapid Eye Movement (REM). After 30-60 minutes of sleep an individual begins REM sleep. During REM, one involuntarily moves their eyes back and forth. The eye movements cause a neurobiological reaction which stimulates a reprocessing of the day's memories and makes recent memories into old memories. If someone has a negative memory in their day, the REM process facilitates making this recent bad memory no longer bothersome.

REM and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Traumatic memories occur when one is overwhelmed by either witnessing or enduring something that is horrific beyond the typical human experience. This might include combat, child abuse, domestic violence, personal assault, traffic accidents or traumatic medical procedures. Because of the severity of these memories, the REM mechanism described does not work. In these cases, the individual remains aware of the memory and continues to experience its negative impacts. The memory is not reprocessed and the individual could go on for decades terrorized by their own memory. This is called Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

Negative Memories and the "Three Point Power Supply"

All negative memories create three things which exist interdependently and make a memory seem unpleasant. These three things are a negative emotion, an unpleasant body sensation and a negative self belief. Say for example someone went to a social gathering and said something foolish in front of a group of people. When thinking

about this memory, the person would experience embarrassment, flushing and a self belief of "I am so stupid!" During REM, eye movements create an even stimulation of the right and left hemispheres of the brain and cause a tremendous and fixated calm in the body. Since the body is so relaxed, it does not react during the subconscious reprocessing of daily negative memories. The body reaction is separated from the two other interdependent "power supplies" and the negative impacts of the memory fade. The individual can recall the event but no longer experiences embarrassment, flushing or a negative self belief.

EMDR Procedure as REM Simulation

EMDR is a simulation of REM used in a therapeutic setting and applied to a traumatic memory. During an EMDR session, a client visualizes a trauma while recognizing the negative emotion, body sensation and self belief. The therapist measures the negative response levels and leads the client through sets of eye movements by use of a light bar or "eye scan". After 45-60 minutes, the negative impacts of the trauma are gone...permanently.

EMDR, Performance Enhancement and the Workplace

All individuals are functioning below their potential because of a history of mistakes, criticisms, self questioning or relational abuse. A therapist can uncover these performance interferences by asking someone a detailed list of questions to help the person visualize an ideal state. The ideal state may have to do with performance in school, the performing arts, sports, relationships or in the workplace. The therapist asks what memories or experiences get in the way of the individual being able to live up to their ideal. Those memories are then treated as EMDR memory targets, the EMDR procedure is done in the office and the client is free to return to their goals without the interference of negative memories.

For example, imagine an employee who is highly skilled and committed and his boss wants to promote him to a manager position. The employee, however, has a number of problems relating to employees including having a temper and not listening. The CEO very much wants to promote him but without the necessary relational skills, the CEO would have to hire from outside the company.

Using the EMDR performance protocol, that potential manager would be asked a series of questions to assist him in seeing his ideal work state. For example... "In the ideal state what are you doing that you are not doing now?" "What personal characteristics or qualities are improved?" "What are you feeling in the ideal picture?" "What do you believe about yourself?" After the potential manager sees this ideal picture of himself interacting with his employees he then is asked to identify a memory that interferes with his being able to live the ideal picture. Most of the time the employee will describe negative memories related to their relationship with their parents. This may be in the form of criticism, neglect or abuse. Most all stated and volunteered answers regarding interfering memories are from childhood. Then the employee would be asked to visualize the bothersome memory and do the set up for the EMDR procedure. The person follows the EMDR procedure described above, eliminates the negativity of the old memory and visualizes himself in the ideal state.

Simply doing this one procedure, the employee returns to work that day and begins to improve and act differently.

The employee may have a series of memories that interfere with the ideal performance picture and each memory is reprocessed using the EMDR procedure. Each one hour session will cover 1-2 memories. The treatment process is brief and intense lasting 8-12 sessions. Unlike traditional therapy that requires time between sessions, EMDR can be completed as quickly as one would like.

What are some typical work performance problems addressed by EMDR?

1. Public speaking
2. Managing difficult people
3. Increased effectiveness in sales
4. Increased believability in short and long-term success goals
5. Increased ability to communicate with potential business partners
6. Increased success in working on a team
7. Increased ability to manage time
8. Increased ability to manage workplace crisis
9. Increased ability to manage job stress
10. Increased physical health due to fewer symptoms of stress

The EMDR performance enhancement procedure has allowed employees to get past personal issues, better use their skills and knowledge and be promoted. Also, employers have been able to retain valued employees who otherwise would have been terminated because of ongoing behavioral and emotional problems carried to the workplace.

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