

What is EMDR?

By Jeff Dwarshuis LMSW, ACSW

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment that quickly and effectively eliminates the impacts of negative memory. EMDR has its beginnings as a treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and has been very effective with 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 and Mental Health

In the therapeutic setting, EMDR is a tremendous tool for eliminating mental health symptoms. Most all mental health diagnosis have their origins in life events and the memories of these events cause symptoms. The impacts of negative memories are most obvious in PTSD but also are very much a part of depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders. Using EMDR, the therapist and client are open to eliminating the negative thoughts, feelings and self perceptions created by any memory. The possibilities for healing are enormous. Additionally, EMDR is user friendly since it is quick and highly effective. Clients utilize a well established and highly effective technique that works and the average length of therapy, compared to traditional therapy, can be reduced by 60% to 80%.

EMDR and Performance Enhancement

EMDR also is used effectively with personal performance. 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.

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