

EMDR Explained: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

What is EMDR?

EMDR is a therapeutic technique that can bring quick and lasting relief for many types of emotional distress. EMDR is supported by over 25 years of research and is now recognized as a leading treatment for trauma by the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization. When administered correctly, EMDR is safe and effective, and it does not require client homework or the use of drugs.

How does EMDR work?

EMDR therapy works at the physiological and neurological levels and uses a natural function of the body, Rapid Eye Movement (REM), as its basis. Our mind uses REM during sleep to help us process and make sense of our daily emotional experiences. When negative events and associated emotions are overwhelming, the natural process becomes overloaded and fails. Instead of consolidating distressing experiences with other memories and thoughts, the brain stores distressing memories in raw fragmented bits of information as images, sounds, thoughts and feelings. As a result, the experience doesn't feel complete or over. People often describe being stuck in their experience, "frozen in time" and unable to move on. The slightest thing can trigger flashbacks that are as intense as when the traumatic event first occurred. Over time, negative effects can spill over and spread to other areas of functioning.

For example, a person who experienced a major no-fault car accident may logically know that they "are ok now" or that "it wasn't their fault", yet may feel on edge or are always "on the lookout", ruminating on and having unexpected flashbacks about the accident. Anything linked to cars, like the sound of a car engine or just standing at an intersection, can trigger distress, making it difficult for a person to drive again or leading them to avoid all activities that require driving. Constant distress may impact work, relationships and the way the person sees themselves. Over time, negative beliefs may begin to take root such as "I'm broken," "I'm weak," "it's my fault," or "I'm a failure."

Under conditions carefully managed by your therapist, EMDR stimulates the natural process of consolidating memories by activating both sides of the brain, the right emotional side (where trauma fragments are primarily stored) and the left logical side. The ongoing flow of neural activity, combined with the carefully guided recollection of events, helps to properly reprocess the traumatic experience. In the end, the memory remains but the negative response is neutralized.

What Does EMDR Look Like in Session?

Initially, your therapist will want to understand your goals and help you identify past events and related experiences that contribute to your current distress. Next, you will agree on the therapy plan so you feel safe and in control of the process, determine your distress tolerance level, and develop coping strategies for use during therapy.

When it is time to process a distressing memory, you will be asked to hold that memory in mind, along with the related beliefs, images, emotions, and physical sensations. Your therapist will then guide you through bilateral stimulation while monitoring your response and ensuring the process remains within your window of tolerance. You will remain in control of the process and you will be able to pause or take breaks if needed. The overall process can be complex if there are many experiences connected to the current symptoms.



After distressing memories are neutralized, the past will begin to feel like it is truly in the past. Often people find they can think about their processed memories without becoming upset or experiencing intense emotions or sensations. Once this is achieved, treatment will focus on current triggers and the development of skills and behaviors needed to adaptively cope with future events.

What are the Advantages of EMDR over other Forms of Therapy?

First, EMDR does not require a lot of homework. Much of the work is completed in session with your therapist. Second, unlike traditional talk therapy, EMDR does not require detailed conversations and offers a more private way to process trauma. This is important for people who want to heal from experiences full of shame, guilt, or remorse. This is also helpful for people who find it difficult to verbally express themselves. For example, to describe an event, a client may simply respond, “it was the time my friend did something to me” or “when that car hit me.”

How Long Does EMDR Treatment Take?

Treatment progress can be rapid, however, the number of sessions will vary, according to the complexity of the issues being dealt with. In general, the more isolated the traumatic memory, the shorter the treatment tends to be. For individuals with a history of multiple painful experiences, a number of EMDR sessions in conjunction with other therapeutic strategies may be needed.

EMDR is a highly specialized method that requires formal training and supervised clinical experience. It should only be performed by mental health professionals who hold proper EMDR certification.

What Else Can EMDR Treat?

In addition to trauma, EMDR has shown to be effective in the treatment of:

- Phobias & fears
- Low self-confidence
- Depression
- Generalized anxiety
- Performance anxiety
- Stress reduction
- Substance and gambling addictions
- Chronic pain
- Complicated grief and mourning

Next Steps

If you have any questions, please call us to speak with one of our trauma specialists. We can help you decide if trauma treatment may be a good fit for you (**Tel: 780-710-9567**).

