



Can You Benefit from EMDR Therapy?

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

For people who are experiencing symptoms from past traumas, there's a therapy that could help. It's called EMDR which stands for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. This technique, offered by trained therapists, truly can help you to "desensitize" traumatic events and "reprocess" your emotional response to these events.

EMDR works for people of all ages who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Those with PTSD have experienced some type of trauma in their lives, some distressing life experience that has a lasting, negative impact. This can include physical, sexual or emotional abuse experienced during any period in our lives, or the loss of a loved one, or even a single incident of traumatic assault. Military personnel who have been in combat situations may also develop PTSD.

For anyone with PTSD, EMDR has been proven to help. There are 24 controlled treatment outcome studies have shown the effectiveness of EMDR in treating PTSD.

Before these studies, many people had assumed that EMDR was a scam, not real therapy. That perception of it may have started because it's such an unusual technique. But the research has proven how successful it is as a method of treatment.

That's why EMDR has been declared an effective form of trauma treatment by a wide range of organizations. In the United States these include the American Psychiatric Association, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, and the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. EMDR is also recognized as an effective trauma treatment by the World Health Organization.

What is it like to have PTSD? If you're suffering from PTSD, some of the specific symptoms you might have include intrusive thoughts of the traumatic event, flashbacks, increased arousal, nightmares, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, avoidance of any type of reminder of the trauma, angry outbursts, or being easily startled.

EMDR has been shown to reduce these symptoms.

Actually, EMDR therapy has been shown to be effective for any psychological disorder that was caused by a distressing experience. This includes problems such as depression, anxiety, phobias, attachment disorders, and anger control disorders, in addition to PTSD.

What to expect from EMDR Therapy

Working with an EMDR-trained therapist, you will first tell a little about your history, revealing key emotional issues experienced in your life. Your therapist will then make an assessment of your situation and develop a treatment plan with you.

Your EMDR treatment will target three areas of concern: 1) your past memories, 2) the present disturbance you're experiencing in your life, and 3) your readiness to handle future situations. The amount of time the complete treatment will take depends upon your unique history.

EMDR therapy will help you process the experiences that are causing you problems, and to replace these with new experiences that will help you regain emotional health. In EMDR, "processing" does not mean talking about your issues. "Processing" refers to learning how to "digest" the experiences that are causing you problems and store them safely in your brain.

Through this process, you will retain what is useful from your experiences and store this with healthy, new emotions in your brain. This type of memory will have the power to guide you in positive ways in the future. At the same time, you will learn to discard your inappropriate emotions, beliefs, and body sensations that have developed over the years. These negative emotions, feelings and behaviors are typically caused by unresolved experiences that are pushing you in the wrong directions.

The ultimate goal of EMDR therapy is to leave you with new emotions, new understanding, and new perspectives. This, in turn, will generate healthy and useful behaviors in the future.

How does EMDR work?

In a typical treatment session, your therapist will ask you to recall details about your traumatic event, including the emotions you've attached to it. The therapist then guides you through bilateral stimulation.

This is a method which repeatedly activates the opposite sides of the brain. This bilateral stimulation activates the part of the brain that processes memories. Most commonly, therapists ask you to follow an object such as their hand back-and-forth with your eyes. This mimics the eye movements that happen during the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) phase of sleep. Other effective methods include "tapping", by tapping alternately and rhythmically on your hands or legs, or by using a sound machine that sends sound signals alternately and repeatedly from one ear to the other.

Through bilateral stimulation, the memory itself as well as the destructive thought patterns, the emotions, and the body sensations that are attached to that memory are targeted. This allows for full healing to be achieved.

What do you think? Does EMDR sound like it could be helpful to you?

(I extend my appreciation to Gabrielle Manske, LCSW-C, an EMDR-trained psychotherapist, who assisted me with information for this column. Gabrielle is the Director of Quality Management at Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services.)

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

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