Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing – EMDR

What is EMDR?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing. It is an evidenced based (this means it is supported by a large amount of scientific research), effective form of therapy for people who have been through difficult, frightening or traumatic experiences. It can also help with other problems such as phobias (reacting with extreme fear about a situation, living creature, place or object) particularly when a memory of something from the past is causing difficulties now.

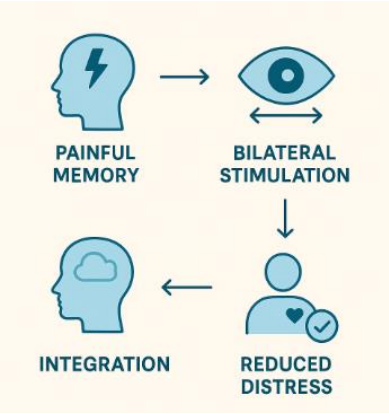
What is Trauma?

When we experience something traumatic, our brains do not process what happens in the same way as a normal experience. Normally, memories are sorted and "filed away" in our minds but during a traumatic experience, the brain is in survival mode and the memory might stay as broken parts in our mind and emotions stay feeling raw and current.

Our brains have a natural way to recover from traumatic memories and events. This process involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm system for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists the learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the pre-frontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion). Stress responses are part of your natural fight, flight, or freeze instincts. When distress from a disturbing event remains, the upsetting images, thoughts, and emotions may create feelings of being overwhelmed, being back in the moment, or being frozen in time. EMDR therapy helps process these memories and allows the normal healing to resume. The experience is still remembered, but the fight, flight, or freeze response from the original event is resolved.

Common experiences can be flashbacks, nightmares, difficulty sleeping, disconnected from feelings, being jumpy or 'on edge', feeling tearful or easily upset, trouble concentrating, avoiding things that remind you of the event. Also, children may act younger than they are or become clingy.

Sometimes these can diminish with time but if it has been several months, EMDR therapy may be helpful. EMDR helps create the connections between your brain's memory and networks, enabling your brain to process the traumatic memory in a very natural way.



How does EMDR work?

During EMDR, your therapist wil encourage you to think about the traumatic memory and will direct you through side-to-side eye movements, sounds or tapping. The side-to side stimulation helps your brain to work in a different way which 'unlocks' the difficult memories and helps your brain to sort and process them. EMDR does not take the memory itself away but it helps to desensitize from it. Doing this wil help feel like something has happened in the past rather than something that is still happening. EMDR is not physically painful but can be emotionaly upsetting at times.

How is EMDR different from other therapies?

EMDR therapy does not require talking in detail about the distressing issue or homework between sessions. EMDR, rather than focusing on changing the emotions, thoughts, or behaviors resulting from the distressing issue, allows the brain to resume in its natural healing process. Part of the therapy includes alternating eye movements, sounds, or taps.

What happens at a EMDR appointment?

EMDR uses the natural healing of the body. During your session, you will be asked specific questions about a disturbing memory. Attention will be given to a negative image, belief, and body feeling related to this event, and then to a positive belief that would indicate the issue is resolved. While the client focuses on the upsetting event, the therapist will begin sets of side-to-side eye movements, sounds, or taps. The client will be guided to notice what comes to mind after each set. They may experience shifts in insight or changes in images, feelings, or beliefs regarding the event. The client has full control to stop the therapist at any point, if needed. The set of eye movements, sounds, or taps are repeated until the event becomes less disturbing.

Eye movements, similar to those during REM sleep, will be recreated simply by asking you to watch light sequences on a bar of moving lights. These will last for a short while and then stop. You then report back on the experiences you have had during each of the sets of eye movements.

With repeated sets of eye movements, the memory tends to change in such a way that it loses its painful intensity and simply becomes a neutral memory of an even in the past. Other associated memories may also heal at the same time. This can lead to a dramatic and rapid improvement in many aspects of your life.

What can EMDR treat?

In addition to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), EMDR has shown successful at treating:

Anxiety and Panic Attacks	Depression, Bipolar disorder
Stress	Phobias
Sleep Problems	Complicated Grief
Addictions	Pain Relief
Self-esteem	Performance Anxiety
Chronic illness, medical issues	

Will I remain in control and empowered during sessions?

You will remain in control, fully alert and wide-awake. This is not a form of hypnosis and you can stop the process at any time. Throughout the session, the therapist will support and facilitate your own self-healing and intervene as little as possible. Reprocessing is usually experienced spontaneously, and new connections and insights are felt to come naturally from within. As a result, most people experience EMDR as being natural and very empowering therapy.

Links for more information on EMDR:

EMDR Institute, Inc.: https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/

EMDR International Association: https://www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/