



Information on EMDR Therapy

What is EMDR?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing.

EMDR is a powerful psychological therapy that was developed by Dr Francine Shapiro, an American clinical psychologist, in the 1980s. As a Senior Research Fellow at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, USA, she published the first research data confirming the efficacy of EMDR in 1989.

Since then a wealth of research has been conducted demonstrating its benefits in treating psychological trauma arising from experiences as diverse as violent conflict, natural disaster, physical assault, road traffic and workplace accidents and childhood sexual and/or physical abuse or neglect. EMDR is increasingly proving itself across the breadth of psychological disorder and has been found to be of benefit to children as well as adults.

EMDR is a powerful therapy and training in it is reserved to mental health professionals. You are strongly recommended to consult only legitimate clinicians who have undertaken an accredited training course recognised by the EMDR Europe and EMDR UK & Ireland Associations. Accredited training organisations can be found under 'Trainers' on the EMDR Association website (www.emdrassociation.org.uk) and your therapist should be happy to show you their certificate of training so that you can check their provider.

How does EMDR work?

Psychological distress is often overwhelming and, in some cases, the brain is unable to process the information normally. The distressing memory seems to become frozen on a neurological level and recalling the event can seem like re-living the experience. The person may remember exactly what they saw, heard, smelt, tasted or felt. Such 'flashbacks' can be very distressing and disruptive to normal life, so much so that the person blocks off their memories of the event or even 'zones out' to avoid frightening or uncomfortable feelings. EMDR therapy relies on alternating left-right stimulation of the brain, through side-to-side eye movement, for example, which appears to help the brain to process the frozen or blocked information. Besides eye movements, bilateral stimulation can also be achieved through auditory or tactile means, for example by alternating sounds in each ear or taps that you can feel.

As a result, the traumatic memories seem to lose their intensity; they become less distressing and seem more like 'ordinary' memories. The bilateral stimulation may be similar to that which occurs naturally during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep when your eyes rapidly move from side to side. EMDR helps reduce the distress of all the different kinds of memories, whether it was what you saw, heard, smelt, tasted, felt or thought.

Note that EMDR is not hypnosis. Even though you are moving your eyes during EMDR you remain conscious AND in control at all times. EMDR cannot be done against your will.

What can I expect from my EMDR therapist?

Bilateral stimulation is only one part of the story, however. EMDR is a comprehensive therapeutic approach with principles, protocols and procedures with the goal of reducing distress in the shortest period of time.

Your EMDR therapist will first spend time getting to know your history. This generally includes understanding the kind of distress you are experiencing, emotional, psychological and physical problems you may be facing, the medication and the support you may already have. If your therapist feels EMDR is appropriate for you, then s/he will describe the EMDR model to you and explain the theory behind it.

You can ask your therapist questions and express any concerns you may have. Your therapist will spend some time doing some relaxation exercises with you, which could include guided visualisation, deep muscle relaxation, breathing retraining and so on.

Once you and your therapist feel that you are sufficiently prepared, your therapist will ask you to select an image that represents the distressing event. You will then be asked to think about negative and positive thoughts, your feelings, the amount of distress you feel and where you feel it in your body.

Your therapist will then begin the visual, auditory or tactile stimuli while you hold the image in mind. After each set of stimuli s/he will ask you what came to mind or what you noticed. During the bilateral stimulation you may experience the traumatic memory intensely to start with, but the discomfort usually reduces as the memory is processed.

Your therapist will continue until your distress is reduced as much as possible. Before the end of the session, your therapist will give you time to feel calm again, using the safe-pleasant place exercise or relaxation techniques. **Will my therapist use any equipment?**

Following your therapist's fingers back and forth as s/he moves them across your visual field is one way of producing the right kind of bilateral stimulation. But your therapist may choose to use a 'light bar', in which you will follow a light that moves back and forth across a metal bar.

For auditory bilateral stimulation, your therapist will ask you to wear headphones and listen to a click or music which alternates from ear to ear. Some therapists use tactile bilateral stimulation, in which they tap your hands alternately. To create a similar effect, other therapists use small terminals that you can hold in your hands and vibrate alternately.

What will I feel like after the session?

EMDR treatment generates a certain amount of 'momentum' to your thinking and conscious awareness. In other words the treatment does not just stop immediately after your session. The bilateral stimulation can bring a lot of memories to mind and you may find yourself continuing to reflect on these after the session. Some people report that they recall aspects of the events that were previously 'lost' to them. If these memories are distressing, you may feel unsettled for a day or two. During this time it is recommended that you use your relaxation techniques to soothe yourself. It is best not to do anything too stressful straight after your EMDR session, such as take an exam, for example.

As the distress decreases with EMDR, people report feelings of relief. At the end of EMDR therapy, many people say that they are no longer disturbed by their memories and liberation enables them to live more fulfilling and happier lives.

Adapted from the EMDR Association website 2012
www.emdrassociation.org.uk