

What is EMDR?

Client information sheet

What is EMDR and how does it work?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It was developed by Francine Shapiro in 1987 as a therapy to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). EMDR uses the mind's natural healing abilities, similar to how the body heals itself. It is based on the idea that the brain processes information during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.

In most circumstances, the mind effortlessly processes new experiences and information without conscious awareness. However, when a person undergoes an overwhelming event or is subjected to repeated distress, their natural coping mechanism can become overloaded. This overload can lead to unprocessed and frozen memories, stored in the limbic system of the brain in an emotional and non-verbal form. These traumatic memories can be triggered repeatedly, even if the actual memory is forgotten, causing distress and unpleasant sensations. EMDR helps create connections between different memory networks in the brain, facilitating the natural processing of traumatic memories.

The Process of an EMDR Session

After an assessment and treatment plan, you will practice a grounding and soothing exercise so that you learn to regulate your emotions. After this, if appropriate you will move on to processing sessions in which you will be asked about a specific disturbing memory. The therapist will then recreate eye movements, similar to those your body generates during REM sleep, by asking you to follow their finger moving back and forth. Alternatively, tapping or sounds may be used. You remain fully in control and alert, there are no altered states of consciousness and you can stop the process at any time. You will be asked to share your experiences, including any changes in thoughts, images, and feelings. Through repeated sets of eye movements, the memory tends to lose its intensity, becoming a neutral memory of the past. Other associated memories may also heal during this process, leading to significant improvement in various aspects of your life. EMDR processing sessions last between 60 to 90 minutes.

Applications of EMDR

Besides its effectiveness in treating PTSD, EMDR has shown success in addressing a range of other mental health concerns including anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, sleep problems, grief and loss, and low self-esteem. EMDR can be integrated with other therapeutic approaches.

Who Can Benefit from EMDR?

While EMDR can accelerate therapy and help resolve past traumas, it is not suitable for everyone. The therapy involves revisiting distressing memories which can bring up strong emotions and physical sensations. Any distressing experiences during sessions are typically short-lived. Your therapist will monitor you closely and support you throughout the session.

Empirical Evidence

EMDR has been extensively researched and validated. Over nineteen controlled studies have been conducted, establishing it as the most thoroughly researched method for trauma treatment. It is recognized as an effective treatment for PTSD by respected organisations such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

Further Information

For more information about EMDR and its evidence base, you can visit the websites of the EMDR International Association (www.emdria.org) or the EMDR Institute (www.emdr.com/frequent-questions).