

Revisiting EMDR in Trauma Healing

No doubt the world is experiencing more individual and collective trauma in recent times with terror attacks, mass shootings, natural disasters, hate crimes and other unexpected events. Have you or someone you know been negatively impacted by a traumatic event, have a history of trauma or been a victim of violence?

Back in 1987 California Psychologist Francine Shapiro discovered Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and this cutting edge approach revolutionized the treatment of trauma, helping with recovery from traumatic events and critical incident as well as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). EMDR was initially used in work with military veterans and then increasingly more often with disaster survivors, first responders and others exposed to critical incidents as well as victims of physical and sexual assault too. First responders may develop vicarious traumatization and or PTSD after repeated exposure to catastrophic events and other encounters that are outside the realm of typical human experience.

In traditional therapy a person may talk about a particular event and gain short term or temporary relief or benefit while the EMDR process goes deeper, much faster and has lasting and often permanent effects. Many studies validate the efficacy of the EMDR technique to address trauma with some results indicating 84-90% of participants no longer having symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder when addressing a single event trauma, after 3 therapy sessions. Another study cites a 100% success rate. EMDR utilizes bi-lateral stimulation, which involves the activation of both hemispheres of the brain simultaneously to allow multiple information processing systems to access latent physical, emotional and mental material that has been stored in the cells of the body often for many years, even decades. The process targets the uncovering of an internal negative belief connected to the trauma and ultimately replaces it with a positive cognition.

A skilled EMDR practitioner will assist a client to recall thoughts, feelings, images, and physical sensations associated with a particular trauma, simultaneously and then use the bi-lateral stimulation techniques to help the “whole person” desensitize and reprocess the related event, essentially clearing out or removing the negative impact, emotional material associated with the memory; often on a permanent basis.

After preparing the client through a thorough evaluation and assessment process, the EMDR session traditionally starts with the practitioner sitting across from and just to the side of the subject and raising a hand to eye level with two fingers extended upwards (similar to the scouts honor sign). The therapist then utilizes a back and forth right to left motion of the hand while instructing the person to follow the finger movements with their eyes only, while keeping the head still. There are variations of the technique including:

1. The use of a light bar that moves color coded lights in a left to right, right to left back and forth motion simulating the finger movements.
2. The use of tactile stimulation whereby the client holds 2 pulsar devices one in each hand attached with wires to a control device held by the therapist who can send alternating and intermittent vibrations with fluctuating intensities at various speeds to each of the pulsars.
3. Headphones may be worn and a variety of pleasant auditory tone sounds are alternated right ear to left ear and are can be soothing while effective. A combination of these techniques are often used in tandem. Although some intense work may occur during the process the client is always returned to a safe, grounded place by the end of the session.

Local Long Island therapist David Grand PhD, wrote a book on EMDR titled Emotional Healing at Warp Speed, and detailed enhancing the process further by developing an even more specialized technique called Brain-spotting, which is used to identify the presence of any stuck or focal trauma spots during the EMDR session. The practitioner can then direct the process with a fixed positioning of the eyes at an uncovered trauma location point allowing a concentrated focus on this location and trauma for an extended time period until the subjective feedback from the client indicates that maximum therapeutic benefit has been achieved at which point the session moves ahead. There are other effective trauma resolution approaches available in recent years including havening, emotional freedom technique (EFT), and thought field therapy (TFT).

With the growing prevalence of trauma related events combined with increased awareness of the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) in today's world we have seen the integration of trauma informed care approaches in most mental health and addiction treatment practices as well. There is an ever expanding body of research supporting the effectiveness of EMDR in helping to resolve trauma.

For further information or to locate an EMDR practitioner on LI contact us

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