

ABOUT EMDR

What does EMDR stand for?

This treatment modality was initially called “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing” because, as it was being developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro, eye movements were used to provide bilateral stimulation, to activate both hemispheres of the brain while processing. At this point, alternate means of creating bilateral stimulation are used, such as holding small “tappers” or paddles, or a light bar, or music via bilateral audio input.

How does the process work?

It is not completely clear how EMDR works. It appears that, in a similar manner to the REM stage of sleep, bilateral stimulation activates both hemispheres of the brain, while focusing on an aspect of a traumatic experience, whether an event itself, or an internalized belief that continues to be “charged” and to impact well-being.

Once we have identified the target event or core belief that needs to be desensitized, we must do some “set up work”, installing positive resources (such as a peaceful place, protective figure, etc.). The actual EMDR session will involve a form of bilateral stimulation such as holding a small paddle in each hand, with a vibrating sensation alternating between left and right hand. The therapist will guide the client through the process while the client simply observes what comes up. As the client continues to do this, the process of bilateral stimulation “unlocks” the memory networks and can dissipate the nerve pathways associated with the traumatic event(s) or the internalized belief.

Do I have to talk about my trauma?

Many people are relieved to know that it is not necessary to talk through the traumatic memories. A client has the option to talk or not; resolution - desensitizing the trauma and reintegrating it - is effected by the change in brainwave activity, not by talking.

EMDR augments the therapeutic process and provides more resolution than talk therapy, because EMDR changes brainwave activity. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, or talk therapy, can be helpful in practical ways, and can assist to define and clarify one’s narrative; but it does not change brainwave activity.

Has it been proven to work?

At least 20 controlled studies have found that EMDR effectively decreases or eliminates the symptoms of PTSD for most clients. The American Psychiatric Association and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies designate EMDR as an effective treatment for PTSD. The National Registry (NREPP) of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) considers EMDR as evidence-based practice for the treatment of PTSD, anxiety and depression symptoms.

EMDR is endorsed by the US Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and the World Health Organization. Dr. Bessel van Der Kolk and other trauma experts consider EMDR to be one of the “big guns” of trauma therapy, as they are both brain-based.