

EMDR – Client Handout

What is EMDR?

The mind can often heal itself naturally, in the same way as the body does. Much of this natural coping mechanism occurs during sleep, particularly during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Francine Shapiro developed Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) in 1987, utilising this natural process in order to successfully treat Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Since then, EMDR has been used to effectively treat a wide range of mental health problems.

What happens when you are traumatised?

Most of the time your body routinely manages new information and experiences without you being aware of it. However, when something out of the ordinary occurs and you are traumatised by an overwhelming event (e.g., a car accident) or by being repeatedly subjected to distress (e.g., childhood neglect), your natural coping mechanism can become overloaded. This overloading can result in disturbing experiences remaining frozen in your brain, "unprocessed". Such unprocessed memories and feelings are stored in the limbic system of your brain in a "raw" and emotional form, rather than in a verbal "story" mode. As a result, the thoughts, emotions and physical sensations associated with the original event can be triggered whenever you encounter similar experiences. Often the memory itself is long forgotten, but the painful feelings such as anxiety, panic, anger or despair are still triggered in the present. Your ability to live in the present and learn from new experiences can therefore become inhibited. EMDR helps create new connections between your brain's memory networks, enabling your brain to process the traumatic memory in a natural way.

What is an EMDR session like?

EMDR utilises the natural healing ability of your body. After a thorough assessment, you will be asked specific questions about a particular disturbing memory. Eye movements, similar to those during REM sleep, will be recreated simply by asking you to watch the therapist's finger moving backwards and forwards across your visual field. Sometimes, gentle taps or aural stimulation are used instead. The eye movements will last for a short while and then stop. You will then be asked to report back on the experiences you have had during each of these sets of eye movements. Experiences during a session may include changes in thoughts, images and feelings.

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 event in the past. Other associated memories may also heal at the same time. This linking of related memories can lead to a dramatic and rapid improvement in many aspects of your life.

What can EMDR be used for?

In addition to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, EMDR has been successfully used to treat:

- anxiety and panic attacks
- depression
- stress
- phobias
- sleep problems
- complicated grief
- addictions
- pain relief, phantom limb pain
- self-esteem and performance anxiety

Can anyone benefit from EMDR?

EMDR can accelerate therapy by resolving the impact of your past traumas and allowing you to live more fully in the present. It is not, however, appropriate for everyone, and your therapist will ensure the treatment is suitable for you. The process is rapid, and any disturbing experiences, if they occur at all, last for a comparatively short period of time. Nevertheless, you need to be aware of, and willing to experience, the strong feelings and disturbing thoughts which sometimes occur during sessions.

How long does treatment take?

EMDR can be a brief focused treatment or part of a longer psychotherapy programme. EMDR sessions last between 60 and 90 minutes.

Will I will remain in control and empowered?

During EMDR treatment, 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 as something that happens spontaneously, and new connections and insights are felt to arise quite naturally from within. As a result, most people experience EMDR as being a natural and empowering therapy.

What evidence is there that EMDR is a successful treatment?

There are now over 30 positive controlled studies into EMDR, making it the most thoroughly researched method used in the treatment of trauma, and the treatment is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) as an effective treatment for PTSD (for further details, go to www.emdr-europe.org and www.emdr.org).