

## What Is EMDR Therapy and Other Questions

By Mark Morris, LCSW

### What is EMDR Therapy?

EMDR Therapy is a comprehensive treatment that focuses on the current effects of past trauma, by 1. developing resources to cope with its after-effects and 2. using BLS (bilateral stimulation) to dissipate those supercharged (“radioactive”) connections to past memories.

Marilyn Huber, Ph.D., explains in her *Client Handbook* why we use EMDR:

*“We know that when something traumatic happens to you, your mind may continue to hold onto it in a way that includes the original picture, sounds, feelings, sensations and thoughts or any combination of the above. It seems like the trauma is locked inside and it can be triggered by many different things or people that you encounter through the day and/or night. These old experiences can still cause a great deal of discomfort. At times, you may feel helpless because you are not able to control what is happening in your mind or your body. That is because you are experiencing the affects and sensations that are connected with this old experience.”*

### What is trauma?

So-called “large T” or “explicit” trauma refers to the big events that often trigger PTSD and its symptoms (examples include: motor vehicle accidents, child abuse, rape, assault, war).

But “small t” trauma is more common and also important to treat. Asha Clinton, Ph.D., MSW, founder of a therapy called “AIT” defines this broader (“small t”) trauma thoroughly:

*“Any occurrence which when it is happening, when we think back to it, or when it is triggered by some present event, evokes painful emotions and/or physical symptoms, sensations, or illnesses, gives rise to negative beliefs, desires, fantasies, compulsions, obsessions, addictions, dissociation, passivity, negativity, primitive defenses, depression, anxiety, delusions, and/or hallucinations, blocks the development of maturity and life-enhancing qualities, destroys or limits spiritual connection, and fractures human wholeness.”*

Using this broader definition, we have learned that clearing trauma can have a huge positive impact on how we experience current triggers in our lives.

### **How can I remember my traumas?**

Sometimes it's difficult to remember specific trauma stories. We typically learn to avoid thinking and talking about difficult memories. Often our brains have buried the traumas for our own protection. Often we compartmentalize or separate the traumatic identity into "parts." This is a healthy defense mechanism until it takes too much energy to avoid the painful memory. When we hide memories from the conscious self in this way, it makes them difficult to access.

EMDR processing often helps us discover memories that were out of our awareness. One technique is to "float back" to the memory based on earlier times you may have felt the same emotion or believed the same core lie about yourself. The act of EMDR processing naturally helps improve memory of past events in most people.

### **How can EMDR help me in the here and now?**

Sometimes we find our memories are difficult to contain. They rise up when triggered almost out of nowhere, or they "feed" into repeated experiences that we are having in the present day. EMDR processing helps ease our reaction to these memories as they begin to rise. It helps us function in the present moment so that we may stop being re-triggered by ongoing events without re-experiencing fears and other reactions from the past.

### **Is EMDR painful?**

Sometimes, just like with any therapy or memory, there may be emotional exposure. This is why we work as a team and you may raise your right hand and say "stop" and we can back off at any time. Also, we will work together and we will discuss how to relieve the pain. As always, your input will help me understand your experience so that I may make it easier for you. There are also "safety nets" in place from the resources aspect of the therapy. Our goal is to relieve the impact of the memories not to reignite them.

All that said, EMDR is usually milder than other therapies (such as CBT, psychodynamic, and exposure) for dealing with trauma because much of the processing is in your own mind, rather than talking it out. I will ask you to report what is going on, but you do not have to share your experience in the detail that you might during talk therapy. Often clients find EMDR Therapy to be easy and are surprised that their pain is lifted quickly without much discomfort. But everyone is unique, and your experience cannot be reliably predicted.

### **Will EMDR erase my memories?**

The original picture, sounds, feelings, sensations and thoughts will not be erased. But successful EMDR Therapy will make it so that when you think of the event, you will not have automatic responses (such as intense emotions or core lies about who you are). It will be like putting the file away in the drawer, rather than having it sit on top of the drawer and attract all the attention. The memory will still be there, but it won't be so "radioactive."

### **Where did EMDR Therapy come from?**

Dr. Francine Shapiro writes how she discovered EMDR in her book "Getting Past the Past."

*"I was walking in the park one day in 1987 and suddenly realized that some disturbing thoughts I was having had disappeared. ... When I brought the thoughts back, they didn't have the same "charge" to them. They simply didn't bother me any more.*

*I was surprised and wondered what caused this reaction. So as I walked along, I started to pay careful attention. I noticed that when a kind of thought came to mind, my eyes started moving very rapidly back and forth diagonally in a certain way. Then the thought shifted from my consciousness. When I brought it back again, it had lost its power. This fascinated me, so I started doing it deliberately. I brought up something that bothered me, and I started doing the eye movements. The same thing happened. My feelings changed.*

*... Luckily, I'd been using my own mind and body as a "laboratory" for the previous ten years after a bout with cancer ... So I decided to search for whatever practical information might be available and get it out to the general public. ... I believed I'd stumbled onto the brain's natural healing process. This worked right into what I'd been exploring for the past ten years - how the mind and body were connected. ..."*

### **What is the Clinical Definition of EMDR?**

A detailed definition is located on the EMDR website, [HERE](#)

<http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.emdria.org/resource/resmgr/imported/EMDRIA%20Definition%20of%20EMDR.pdf>

### **What is the actual EMDR session like?**

The EMDR website explains the entire 8 phase process, [HERE](#)

<https://emdria.site-ym.com/?120>

## **What research has been done on EMDR?**

The EMDR website reports that *approximately 20 controlled studies have investigated the effects of EMDR. These studies have consistently found that EMDR effectively decreases/eliminates the symptoms of post traumatic stress for the majority of clients. Clients often report improvement in other associated symptoms such as anxiety. The current treatment guidelines of the American Psychiatric Association and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies designate EMDR as an effective treatment for posttraumatic stress. EMDR was also found effective by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense, the United Kingdom Department of Health, the Israeli National Council for Mental Health, and many other international health and governmental agencies. Research has also shown that EMDR can be an efficient and rapid treatment.*

Read more about research [HERE](https://emdria.site-ym.com/?122). <https://emdria.site-ym.com/?122>

## **How does EMDR processing work?**

No one is completely sure. But Dr. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist and Associate Clinical Professor at UCLA explains it like this:

*“The mind, which can be defined as the process that regulates the flow of energy and information, is encouraged to process memory and emotion in an efficient and therapeutic manner. As with other forms of psychotherapy, we do not yet know exactly how the healing process occurs in the mind or in the neural processes of the brain. Some authors have proposed that trauma involves an impairment in the integration of various forms of mental processes, such as memory, emotion, perception, and interpersonal communications, so that individuals may feel excessively constrained or at times flooded in the overall functioning of their minds. From a neural point of view, such an impairment in mental processes may be seen as due to a blockage in “neural integration,” the manner in which the brain brings its circuitry into a functional whole.*

*From this perspective, healing in psychotherapy would involve the development of the circuits that enable neural integration to occur in the brain. Areas such as the prefrontal cortex, the hippocampus, the corpus callosum, and the cerebellum are regions that may facilitate neural integration and thus are those that may be changing in effective therapy. EMDR may be particularly effective at promoting neural integration through the ways in which its phases activate distinctive processes in the brain, such as thoughts, emotions, memories, and bodily sensations. As the phases progress in EMDR, neural integration may be proposed to be the brain process that is being facilitated during the various phases of treatment. The result of effectively promoting neural integration would*

*be both the alleviation of symptoms and the development of an enhanced sense of self-being internally as well as more rewarding experiences interpersonally."*

Here is the EMDR website explanation of how EMDR works:

*"No one knows how any form of psychotherapy works neurobiologically or in the brain. However, we do know that when a person is very upset, their brain cannot process information as it does ordinarily. One moment becomes "frozen in time," and remembering a trauma may feel as bad as going through it the first time because the images, sounds, smells, and feelings haven't changed. Such memories have a lasting negative effect that interferes with the way a person sees the world and the way they relate to other people."*

*"EMDR seems to have a direct effect on the way that the brain processes information. Normal information processing is resumed, so following a successful EMDR session, a person no longer relives the images, sounds, and feelings when the event is brought to mind. You still remember what happened, but it is less upsetting. Many types of therapy have similar goals. However, EMDR appears to be similar to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Therefore, EMDR can be thought of as a physiologically based therapy that helps a person see disturbing material in a new and less distressing way." [Source: https://emdria.site-ym.com/?119](https://emdria.site-ym.com/?119)*

### **How is EMDR different from exposure or talk therapy?**

While any trauma therapy will involve exposure and changing thoughts, EMDR does not focus on repeating the story but on processing the consequences of it. It works with the neurochemistry of how the brain processes memory, rather than the challenging your thinking. Dr. Bessel van der kolk explains this in his marvelous book, *The Body Keeps the Score*:

*"Unlike conventional exposure treatment, EMDR spends very little time revisiting the original trauma. The trauma itself is certainly the starting point, but the focus is on stimulating and opening up the associative process. As our Prozac/EMDR study showed, drugs can blunt the images and sensations of terror, but they remain embedded in the mind and body. In contrast with the subjects who improved on Prozac — whose memories were merely blunted, not integrated as an event that happened in the past, and still caused considerable anxiety — those who received EMDR no longer experienced the distinct imprints of the trauma: It had become a story of a terrible event that had happened a long time ago. As one of my patients said making a dismissive hand gesture: "It's over."*

*While we don't yet know precisely how EMDR works, the same is true of Prozac. Prozac has an effect on serotonin, but whether its levels go up or down, and in which brain cells, and why that makes people feel less afraid, is still unclear. We likewise don't know precisely why talking to a trusted friend gives such profound relief, and I am surprised how few people seem eager to explore that question. ... I am much comforted by considering the history of penicillin: Almost four decades passed between the discovery of its antibiotic properties by Alexander Fleming in 1928 and the final elucidation of its mechanisms in 1965."*

### **How does EMDR integrate with CBT and Living Yes?**

They are different and similar. EMDR also involves cognitions and core lies, but does not rely on (cognitive) thinking challenges and does not rely on written homework for healing. I have been successful delivering both therapies alternatively. One approach is to master the basic CBT skills and then switch to EMDR in session while continuing to study and use the processes from CBT and the Living Yes book on your own. Every few sessions, we can step away from EMDR Therapy and discuss CBT or Living Yes to enhance and support your home study.

### **How do I get started with EMDR?**

1. Express to me your interest in EMDR.
2. Complete stabilization forms on the "for new clients page" and go over them with me.
3. Practice the resources I teach you.
4. Think of a "calm safe place" from your past and process it with me.
5. Individually or during therapy with me, compile a list of "target" traumas on which you want to work. Make a list of about ten memories, being sure to include: The age when the event happened and a one - three word picture that represents the worst part of the incident.

I wish you the very best,

**Mark**

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