



WHAT IS EMDR THERAPY?

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is a mental health treatment technique. This method involves moving your eyes a specific way while you process traumatic memories. EMDR's goal is to help you heal from trauma or other distressing life experiences. Compared to other therapy methods, EMDR is relatively new. EMDR treats mental health conditions that happen because of memories from traumatic events in your past. It's best known for its role in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but its use is expanding to include treatment of many other conditions. The first clinical trial investigating EMDR was in 1989. Dozens of clinical trials since EMDR's development show this technique is effective and can help a person faster than many other methods.

WHO NEEDS TO HAVE EMDR THERAPY?

EMDR can help people with a wide range of mental health conditions. Adolescents, teenagers and adults of all ages can benefit from this treatment. Some healthcare providers also specialize in EMDR for children.

WHY IS THIS TREATMENT USED?

EMDR therapy doesn't require talking in detail about a distressing issue. EMDR instead focuses on changing the emotions, thoughts or behaviors that result from a distressing experience (trauma). This allows your brain to resume a natural healing process. While many people use the words "mind" and "brain" when referring to the same thing, they are different. Your brain is an organ of your body. Your mind is the collection of thoughts, memories, beliefs and experiences that make you who you are.

The way your mind works relies on the structure of your brain. That structure involves networks of communicating brain cells across many different areas. That's especially the case with sections that involve your memories and senses. That networking makes it faster and easier for those areas to work together. That's why your senses; sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feels can bring back strong memories.

ADAPTIVE INFORMATION PROCESSING

EMDR relies on the Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) model, a theory about how your brain stores memories. This theory, developed by Francine Shapiro, PhD, who also developed EMDR, recognizes that your brain stores normal and traumatic memories differently.

During normal events, your brain stores memories smoothly. It also networks them, so they connect to other things you remember. During disturbing or upsetting events, networking doesn't happen correctly. The brain can go "offline" and there's a disconnect between what you experience (feel, hear, see) and what your brain stores in memory through language.

Often, your brain stores trauma memories in a way that doesn't allow for healthy healing. Trauma is like a wound that your brain hasn't been allowed to heal. Because it didn't have the chance to heal, your brain didn't receive the message that the danger is over.

Newer experiences can link up to earlier trauma experiences and reinforce a negative experience repeatedly. That disrupts the links between your senses and memories. It also acts as an injury to your mind. And just like your body is sensitive to pain from an injury, your mind has a higher sensitivity to things you saw, heard, smelled, or felt during a trauma-related event.

This happens not only with events you can remember, but also with suppressed memories. Much like how you learn not to touch a hot stove because it burns your hand, your mind tries to suppress memories to avoid accessing them because they're painful or upsetting. However, the suppression isn't perfect, meaning the "injury" can still cause negative symptoms, emotions and behaviors.

TRIGGERS

Sights, sounds and smells with a connection or similarity to a trauma event will “trigger” those improperly stored memories. Unlike other memories, these can cause overwhelming feelings of fear, anxiety, anger or panic.

An example of this is a post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, flashback, where improper storage and networking causes your mind to access those memories in a way that’s uncontrolled, distorted and overpowering. That’s why people with a history of flashbacks describe feeling as if they were reliving a disturbing event. The past becomes the present.

REPROCESSING AND REPAIR

When you undergo EMDR, you access memories of a trauma event in very specific ways. Combined with eye movements and guided instructions, accessing those memories helps you reprocess what you remember from the negative event.

That reprocessing helps “repair” the mental injury from that memory. Remembering what happened to you will no longer feel like reliving it, and the related feelings will be much more manageable.

WHAT CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS DOES EMDR TREAT?

The most widespread use of EMDR is for treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Mental healthcare providers also use it in the treatment of the following conditions:

- Anxiety disorders: Generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias and social anxiety/phobia.
- Depression disorders: Major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder and illness-related depression.
- Dissociative disorders: Dissociative identity disorder or amnesia and depersonalization or derealization disorder.
- Eating disorders: Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder.
- Gender dysphoria (feeling as though your gender is different from the one assigned to you at birth).
- Obsessive-compulsive disorders: Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), body dysmorphic disorder and hoarding disorder.
- Personality disorders: Borderline personality disorder, avoidant personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder.
- Trauma disorders: Acute stress disorder, PTSD and adjustment disorder.

RECOVERY AND OUTLOOK

What is the recovery time from EMDR?

Most people undergo EMDR for several weeks to a few months. Recovery time between sessions is minimal, and your healthcare provider can help guide you on how to take care of yourself between sessions.

WHEN SHOULD I GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE?

You should get emergency care if you have disturbing thoughts about harming yourself, including thoughts of suicide, or about harming others. If you have thoughts like this, you can call any of the following:

SUICIDE AND CRISIS LIFELINE (UNITED STATES). TO CALL THIS LINE, DIAL 988.

988 Suicide Crisis and Lifeline: CALL OR TEXT 988 or 988lifeline.org/chat

1-800-273-8255 (TALK) remains available

National Hope Line Network: 1-800-442-HOPE (4673) Text “HOPELINE” to 741741

Sauk County Mental Health Crisis: 608-355-4200

Columbia County Mental Health Crisis: 518-828-9446

Dane County Mental Health Crisis: 608-280-2600