

# UNRAVELING TRAUMA: A LOOK AT EMDR THERAPY



## Understanding Trauma and EMDR

Imagine a life-altering event that shakes you to your core, leaving you grappling with overwhelming emotions and memories. This is trauma – a complex experience that can hijack our sense of safety and well-being. From the scars of a major incident to the silent wounds of emotional neglect or unmet attachment needs, trauma comes in many forms. Fortunately, there's hope in the form of Eye Movement and Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy.

## The Origins and Evolution of EMDR

EMDR was originated and developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro in the late 1980's after a walk in the park where she observed that her distressing thoughts seemed to diminish as her eyes moved back and forth, scanning her environment. She theorized that rapid eye movements could mimic the natural processes of REM sleep, a phase associated with memory consolidation and integration. Subsequent experiments confirmed that bilateral stimulation, combined with focused attention on distressing memories, significantly alleviated emotional distress linked to trauma. This groundbreaking discovery laid the foundation for EMDR therapy's transformational role in trauma treatment and psychological care. In its early days, EMDR was used as a technique to desensitize symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and has since developed into a



comprehensive psychotherapeutic approach that is used to treat not just the effects of trauma, but a wide range of mental health concerns.

## How EMDR Works

EMDR therapy is based on a theory called the Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) system which suggests that our brains are wired to find ways to cope with life experiences, learn from them, and develop adaptive responses to future situations. The brain naturally seeks helpful ways to handle disturbing or distressing



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experiences. However, when someone experiences trauma, their brain's information processing system may become overwhelmed, causing incomplete processing and storage of the memory. This can lead to ongoing distressing symptoms and negative beliefs linked to the trauma. As Dr. Francine Shapiro aptly stated, "The past affects the present even without our being aware of it".

### **Navigating Traumatic Memories**

Let's explore how memories work. Core memories, especially positive ones, shape different aspects of our personality. Memories can change depending on our interactions with others and how they treat us. When there's healing or resolution, memories can be stored positively. EMDR therapy focuses on addressing memories that are stored in a harmful way, and are linked to specific emotions, physical sensations, and self-beliefs. Sometimes, we get stuck in our view of the world because these memories make past events feel like they're still happening. Our reactions are often rooted in the past. EMDR therapy targets memories that are "stuck" in time, helping us process and move beyond them.

### **Understanding the Brain's Response to Trauma.**

Our brains possess a remarkable ability to naturally

recover from traumatic memories and events. This intricate process involves communication between key brain regions: the amygdala, our alarm system for stressful events; the hippocampus, which aids in learning and memory formation, particularly regarding safety and danger; and the prefrontal cortex, responsible for regulating behavior and emotions. While many traumatic experiences can be managed and resolved spontaneously, some may require outside assistance. When distress from a disturbing event persists, it can trigger our innate fight, flight, or freeze instincts. EMDR therapy steps in to aid the brain in processing these memories, allowing normal feelings to resume. Although the experience is still remembered, the intense response from the original event is resolved, alleviating feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped in the past. Through EMDR therapy, the mind is guided towards understanding that it is simply recalling memories, rather than reliving them.

### **Techniques and Components of EMDR**

EMDR therapy offers a comprehensive approach to trauma, drawing from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to reshape negative thoughts, and psychodynamic therapy to explore the impact of early experiences. It also includes somatic practices to address trauma stored in the body. By integrating

cognitive restructuring and emotional regulation, EMDR empowers individuals to manage distressing memories, fostering resilience and lasting emotional well-being. BLS (Bilateral Stimulation) and DAS (Dual Attention Stimuli) are core components of EMDR therapy. These techniques involve engaging the brain in tasks that alternate between both hemispheres, such as visually following hand movements or auditory cues. They allow the brain to process small chunks of traumatic memory while keeping the individual grounded and present, fostering a sense of safety and the ability to make meaning and develop insights, in the presence of an empathetic witness. The trust and safety established in the therapeutic relationship are essential, especially for those who have felt isolated in their trauma experiences. As they begin to find new meaning, the therapeutic relationship provides a sense of connection that supports their healing journey.

### **The Structured Approach of EMDR Therapy**

Operating within a structured framework, EMDR therapy consists of a three-pronged approach and an eight-phase model, offering a comprehensive roadmap that guides therapists and clients through the healing journey. This method ensures systematic and effective trauma resolution by addressing past experiences, present triggers, and future challenges with precision and compassion.

### **EMDR's Impact and Research**

Backed by an impressive array of research and endorsed by renowned organizations worldwide, EMDR therapy stands as a gold standard in trauma treatment. From the World Health Organization to the Department of Defense, EMDR's efficacy in reshaping lives has earned it a well-deserved spot at the forefront of psychotherapy.

### **Seeking EMDR Therapy**

Research shows that EMDR therapy delivers faster and more sustainable results compared to other therapies. It provides comprehensive treatment for a wide range of issues, including major traumas (big T) and less

severe but still significant traumas (little t), attachment difficulties, addictions, dissociative disorders, phobias, anxiety disorders, OCD, and performance-related concerns. EMDR is beneficial for various populations, including veterans, first responders, children, and couples, and it effectively addresses depression resulting from unmet needs. Additionally, EMDR accelerates the grief process by addressing feelings of betrayal, responsibility, or shock, leading to a smoother and more efficient healing journey. It's effective for improving self-esteem, body image, stress reduction, parenting, disordered eating, and aiding chronic pain management by addressing the emotional and psychological aspects. When seeking an EMDR therapist, it's important to ensure that the therapist has completed their training through an organization approved by the EMDR International Association (EMDRIA). Look for therapists committed to their own growth through advanced training, ongoing consultation, and personal therapy, as these qualities foster a nurturing and effective therapeutic environment. Finally, trust your instincts and schedule a consultation to ensure a good fit for your healing journey.

### **A Call to Action**

Share this article with a friend or loved one who may benefit from the life-changing impact of EMDR therapy. Together, we can spread hope and healing to those in need.

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Located in Gilbert, AZ, EMDR Transformations Counseling embraces EMDR therapy as a healing approach unlike any other. Our team is committed to providing an exceptional therapeutic experience ensuring our clients feel welcomed, supported, and empowered throughout their healing journey. We provide a complimentary 15-minute consultation to see if we're a good match.

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