

Information about Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy

What is EMDR?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing.

The treatment includes sessions in which you focus on an experience which is troubling you. While thinking about the experience, you follow the therapist's fingers (or a light bar) from left to right with your eyes. These movements back and forth are referred to as "Bilateral Stimulation". It is not hypnosis: you remain fully conscious throughout. Other forms of bilateral stimulation that may be used are tapping left and right and listening to sounds in your left and right ear. The therapist will talk to you about the different options and find the one that suits you best.

The procedure of thinking about the distressing experience and following the bilateral stimulation results in the disturbing memory losing its intensity. It is not forgotten but it ceases to be troubling. In other words, it has been "desensitised" and "reprocessed".

Who is EMDR for?

EMDR is for people who have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or trauma in the context of other presentations. This means that something that took place in the past, and which was very disturbing, gets replayed as if it is still happening in the present – for example, through flashbacks or nightmares, unwanted thoughts, images and sensations. This can make you feel anxious and constantly on guard and may lead you to avoid situations which trigger the memories.

How does it work?

The idea is that traumatic events which are overwhelming are not stored like other memories - they remain active and intrusive. The bilateral stimulation used in EMDR involves a dual focus of attention, requiring you to focus on something happening in the present (for example, following the therapist's fingers) while thinking about the event in the past. This enables the brain to process and store the memory correctly.

How effective is EMDR?

Scientific trials of its effectiveness have shown that it is highly effective. It is recommended by NICE as a treatment for PTSD.

What is an EMDR session like?

The initial sessions will involve an assessment of things that are troubling you at the moment, including aspects of your past experience which may be contributing to the problem.

Subsequent sessions involve preparing you for desensitisation and reprocessing by teaching techniques to manage any distress that arises during the processing.

At the end of each session, the therapist will focus on using techniques to leave you in a calm state and provide information about what to expect in between sessions (e.g. some people may find themselves remembering more aspects of the memory) and a suggestion to keep a log.

At the beginning of each subsequent session, the therapist will review your week and the processing that remains to be done.

Who can provide EMDR?

EMDR should be practised by therapists who have a core mental health profession and a formal training in EMDR which meets the competences of the UCL competence framework or of EMDR accreditation bodies.

More information

You can find more information about EMDR at the website of the EMDR Association UK:
<https://emdrassociation.org.uk/>