

What is EMDR?

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)^{1,2} has been used effectively for over 30 years with many different psychological distresses, including anxiety, depression, panic, grief, nightmares, pain, addiction, phobias, abuse, trauma, amongst many others. EMDR is one of the world's most well-researched and empirically validated psychological treatments.

EMDR is a modern psychological treatment that defuses past memory fragments (e.g. pictures, thoughts, sounds, feelings, and body sensations) that are causing distress in the present – unresolved painful moments that have unnaturally become 'frozen in time', often unconscious, and which, if not treated, can interfere with the way a person copes with the present.

There remains much to learn about how the brain processes memories. Our brain's memory storage capacity is limited³. And, to cope with the daily overload of information it gets from our senses, in simplified terms, the brain defrags – a natural brain information cleansing process that is understood to occur during REM sleep when memories shift from short-term to long-term memory, where they consolidate with other memories.

Some psychological distress is caused when toxic memory fragments from upsetting adverse life experiences, including traumatic events, become unnaturally stuck in short-term memory, which then trigger ongoing stresses in later life, unless re-processed and stored healthily in the brain's long-term memory.

EMDR uses bilateral stimulation (commonly through eye movement that mimics REM) to re-process stuck toxic memory fragments. These memories don't get erased during EMDR, but reduce in their intensity and disturbance, so they feel less significant, quieter, turning down the volume on symptoms, with memory recall becoming less upsetting, less draining.

During EMDR, the therapist works with the client to identify a specific memory for treatment. The client then "calls to mind" the disturbing issue or event. The therapist then begins bilateral stimulation - commonly eye movements. Stimulation is continued until the memory becomes less disturbing and gets linked to other positive memories.

EMDR not only resolves toxic memories, but in so doing, most often changes the perspective a person has about themselves, including developing new positive self-beliefs.

EMDR doesn't require you to have a vivid recollection or to talk at length about what happened. In fact, some people find talking about a painful life experience to be retraumatizing. Instead, your job during EMDR is to observe what you're noticing, without needing it to be accurate or even make logical sense, so that your brain's natural healing process can start piecing together and re-store the fragments to help you regain a normal and healthy perspective.

The expected course of treatment time depends on individual circumstances. It is common to get some immediate improvement after just one processing session, with gains increasing with subsequent sessions. And it's also common that a single traumatic event will take fewer treatment sessions than childhood trauma. A rule of thumb? National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (UK) estimate 8-12 sessions for simpler conditions.

Some other cool benefits of EMDR include:

- During EMDR you are always fully awake and in control,
- Memory accuracy is not critical - a vague sense of memories is sufficient,
- EMDR is not dangerous when administered by a professionally trained EMDR therapist (refer EMDR Institute).

Further Information Resources:

1. EMDR International Association: <https://www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/> (10min)
2. EMDR Association UK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIJZQAr9nQo&t=12s> (4 mins)
3. View the short Sentis brain videos available at <https://www.youtube.com/sentisdigitalon>, especially "Concentration"