



## **The Benefits and Uses of EMDR**

*Frequently Asked Questions about EMDR. Answers taken from the International Association of EMDR.*

### **What is EMDR?**

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a psychological method for treating emotional difficulties that are caused by disturbing life experiences, ranging from traumatic events such as accidents, assaults, illness, natural disasters to upsetting childhood experiences that have had a lasting effect on one's life. EMDR is a complex method that combines elements from well-established theoretical orientations, including psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral and client centered approaches with the unique element of eye movements or other bilateral stimulation such as taps or tones.

### **What is it Used For?**

Research has indicated that EMDR is effective in the treatment of distressing memories and post-traumatic stress reactions. Some therapists report that it can be helpful in the treatment of anxiety, depression, and other clinical presentations such as complicated grief reactions, phobias, and self-esteem issues. EMDR has also been used to help alleviate performance anxiety and to enhance the functioning of people at work, on the playing field, and in the performing arts. For many clients EMDR provides more rapid relief than conventional therapies.

### **What Happens in EMDR?**

During an EMDR session, the clinician works with the client to identify a specific memory or issue that will become the focus of the treatment session. The clinician initiates eye movements as the client focuses their attention on the targeted event and its related image, thoughts, sensations, and emotions. Once the client is engaged in the experience, he or she is likely to experience various aspects of the initial memory or other memories that are associated with it. The clinician pauses with the eye movements at regular intervals to insure that the client is processing adequately on their own. As the session progresses, clients usually access more positive and adaptive information. The treatment goal is to eliminate distress and to change related negative beliefs and behaviors.

### **Why Do So Many Clients Respond Well to EMDR?**

Often when a person experiences a very distressing event, the memory is not fully processed, and it remains in a "raw" state, so that the original emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations are easily activated. EMDR is a client centered approach that appears to mobilize the brain's processing system to resolve the disturbing memory. During EMDR the client is able to access other positive or adaptive information, which is then integrated in the memory network. This resolution of the memory results in the client thinking and feeling differently about the experience.

### **What is the Mechanism That Makes EMDR so Effective?**

While it is not clear how EMDR works, there are ongoing investigations of the possible mechanisms involved. What is clear is that present day occurrences can reactivate negative thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that arise from earlier experiences that are

disturbing. It appears that EMDR can change the association of those experiences, greatly decreasing the current distress about past and present events.

Researchers are exploring several hypotheses of the mechanisms of EMDR to reduce symptoms and/or aid memory reprocessing. These models include disruption of a traumatic recollection in the working memory, increasing psychological distance from the trauma, enhancing communication between brain hemispheres, and psychophysiological changes associated with relaxation or evocation of a rapid-eye-movement-like brain state. Likely, multiple mechanisms may work to produce the treatment gains evidenced in EMDR. *(Gunter & Bodner, "EMDR Works...But How? Recent Progress in the Search for Treatment Mechanisms", Journal of EMDR Practice and Research, Volume 3, Number 3, 2009.)*

### **How Long Does EMDR Therapy Take?**

Once the client and clinician have agreed that EMDR is the treatment of choice, the therapy can take anywhere from 1-3 sessions for a single event trauma to a year or more for more complex problems. A "typical" course of EMDR treatment is generally 3-15 sessions, performed at regular intervals. EMDR therapy can be an adjunctive treatment for a client who is already in psychotherapy, or it can be a therapy unto itself. Ideally, most clients and clinicians prefer EMDR treatment as part of a comprehensive psychotherapeutic approach.

### **Are Eye Movements Needed to Make EMDR Effective?**

Research has yet to demonstrate the necessity of eye movements, or other bilateral stimulation, in EMDR treatment. However, several recent research studies, conducted in different laboratory settings, have found that eye movements consistently decreased the vividness and emotional strength of memory images. It is likely that this effect contributes to information processing by decreasing the power of the negative memory and making it easier for the client to access more positive or adaptive information.

### **What is the Research That Supports EMDR?**

Since 1989, many controlled studies have demonstrated that EMDR is one of the most efficacious treatments available for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Results included significant decreases in a wide range of symptoms and/or the elimination of the diagnosis from most clients. Other preliminary studies indicated that EMDR may be effective in treating phobias, performance anxiety in the workplace, body dysmorphic disorder, trauma in children, and the reduction of chronic pain.

### **Are there any Precautions?**

Yes. It is important that clients are thoroughly screened for EMDR treatment. There are many variables to be taken into account when considering EMDR treatment. The nature of the problem, the emotional stability of the client, the client's history, especially if there is trauma, the medical as well as clinical situation all need to be evaluated. It is important that the clinician administering EMDR has been formally trained by an EMDRIA approved program, and is certified as a practitioner of EMDR by EMDRIA.

### **For further information:**

- For ongoing research results regarding EMDR, see [www.emdria.org](http://www.emdria.org).
- For a complete listing of research from 1989-2006 completed regarding EMDR, see Dr. David Baldwin's award-winning website: [www.trauma-pages.com/s/emdr-refs.php](http://www.trauma-pages.com/s/emdr-refs.php)
- For information regarding getting trained in EMDR, see [www.emdria.org](http://www.emdria.org).
- To locate a certified EMDR clinician in your area, again, see [www.emdria.org](http://www.emdria.org)