

EMDR Therapy and Addictions

What is EMDR Therapy?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It is a form of therapy that helps people heal from trauma or other distressing life experiences.



How EMDR Helps

Our brains have a natural way to recover from traumatic memories and events. This process involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm signal for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists with learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the prefrontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion). While many times traumatic events can be managed and resolved spontaneously, sometimes help is needed. Stress responses are part of our natural fight, flight, or freeze instincts. But when distress from a disturbing event or pattern remains, the upsetting images, thoughts, and emotions may create feelings of overwhelm. EMDR therapy helps the brain process these experiences and allows normal healing to resume. The experience is still remembered, but the fight, flight, or freeze response from the original event is resolved.

Recognition

EMDR therapy has been extensively researched and is recognized as an effective treatment for trauma.

- American Psychiatric Association
- American Psychological Association
- Australia's Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health
- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
- U.K. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
- U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs & Dept. of Defense
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- World Health Organization

View these and more treatment guidelines at www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/emdr-and-ptsd/

What EMDR Is Like

After you and your therapist agree that EMDR therapy is a good fit, you may decide to reprocess an event or reaction. Attention will be given to a negative image, belief, emotion, and body feeling related to this event or reaction, and then to a positive belief that would indicate the issue was resolved. While you bring up the upsetting event, the therapist will begin sets of side-to-side eye movements, sounds, or taps. You will then be asked to notice what comes to mind after each set. You may experience shifts of insight or changes in images, feelings, or beliefs regarding the event. The sets of eye movements, sounds, or taps are repeated until the event or reaction becomes less disturbing. Your job during EMDR is to simply pay attention to what is happening and tell the therapist. You are in control of the treatment process.



EMDR therapy for Addiction

Addictions to substances and behaviors often begin as a way to cope with underlying pain connected to trauma. When the substances or behaviors begin to interfere with day-to-day responsibilities and relationships, these coping skills have likely shifted into the realm of compulsive behaviors or addictions. For someone working toward addiction recovery, EMDR therapy can be used to help desensitize triggers, reinforce positive resources connected to success, and resolve unprocessed trauma memories. EMDR therapy can be used alone or with other approaches in the recovery process to create and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Trauma Symptoms

- Depression, sadness, isolation
- Avoiding responsibilities
- Difficulty functioning in daily life
- Exaggerated startle response, feeling on edge
- Anger/Difficulty controlling aggressive impulses
- Sense of numbness toward life
- Difficulty staying present with life or other dissociative responses
- Shame, guilt, intense worry
- Acting out compulsive behaviors
- Difficulties being in public places/crowds
- Involvement in high-risk behaviors
- Avoiding community activities
- Marital/Family issues
- Chronic pain, headaches, medically unexplained symptoms
- Thoughts of 'I don't deserve to get help' or 'I am hopeless/Nothing will work for me'

"After a few (EMDR trauma protocol) sessions, I noticed a huge difference. It was like a door opened in a dark room I had locked myself into. My life has changed completely. It has been a lot of hard work,.. but I have... continuous sobriety."

-CLIENT TREATED FOR PTSD AND ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE [1]