



Understanding EMDR Therapy

An evidence-informed guide for clients and families

What is EMDR?

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a structured psychological therapy developed to help people process distressing memories and reduce trauma-related symptoms. It was originally developed for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

A key idea

After an overwhelming experience, reminders of what happened may still bring intense feelings, body sensations or unhelpful beliefs. EMDR aims to help the memory become less distressing and easier to integrate into everyday life.

What happens during EMDR?

A trained therapist guides you to briefly focus on aspects of a distressing memory while using alternating bilateral stimulation. This often involves following the therapist's fingers with your eyes, or using alternating taps or sounds.

You remain in control

EMDR is not hypnosis. You stay awake and aware of your surroundings. You can ask questions, take breaks or stop a session. You do not always need to describe every detail of the event aloud.

Flourish Horizon Psychology & Counselling

Prepared for psychoeducation | Dr Mandana Shaban, Clinical Psychologist



The Eight Phases of EMDR

EMDR is more than eye movements; preparation and review are essential

01 History and treatment planning

Understand your experiences, symptoms, strengths, safety and treatment goals.

02 Preparation

Build trust, learn grounding and emotional regulation skills, and agree on a plan.

03 Assessment

Identify a target memory and related thoughts, feelings and body sensations.

04 Desensitisation

Use guided bilateral stimulation while noticing how the memory and distress shift.

05 Installation

Strengthen a more helpful or adaptive belief connected with the memory.

06 Body scan

Notice remaining physical tension or discomfort linked to the target.

07 Closure

Finish safely, use stabilisation skills where needed, and discuss the period between visits.

08 Re-evaluation

Not all phases happen in one session. The pace is individualised.
At a later appointment, check progress and decide what needs attention next.



What EMDR Can Help With

Understanding the evidence and what to expect

Where is the evidence strongest?

EMDR is an evidence-based treatment option for PTSD. Trauma-focused psychological therapies, including EMDR and trauma-focused CBT, are recommended in major clinical guidelines. Whether EMDR is appropriate depends on your needs and clinical assessment.

What about other difficulties?

EMDR has also been investigated for depression, anxiety, phobias, chronic pain and grief. Findings are promising in some areas, but the evidence is less established than it is for PTSD. A clinician should discuss treatment options rather than assume EMDR will suit every condition.

Will treatment be upsetting?

It is possible to experience temporary distress, tiredness, vivid dreams or heightened emotions during or between sessions. Your therapist should discuss these possibilities, monitor your response and help you use appropriate coping strategies.

What if I have complex trauma or dissociation?

Careful assessment, preparation and stabilisation may be particularly important. Some people require extended preparation or an adjusted treatment plan before memory reprocessing. There is no fixed number of sessions for everyone.

Progress varies. EMDR does not erase memories or guarantee symptom resolution.



Preparing for EMDR Therapy

Questions, individual adaptations and further information

Questions to discuss with your therapist

What are my treatment goals? How will you assess whether EMDR is suitable? What preparation will I need? What will we do if I become overwhelmed? How will we monitor my progress and review the plan?

An individualised approach

EMDR can be adapted for differences in communication, sensory processing and emotional regulation. For example, some autistic or ADHD clients may prefer tactile stimulation, flexible pacing or alternative ways to describe memories. Adjustments should be agreed collaboratively, not assumed.

Before beginning

A full clinical assessment should consider your symptoms, support system, current stressors, safety and any dissociation. Ask about the clinician's specific training and experience in EMDR; being a psychologist alone does not establish EMDR training.

Further reading

EMDR Association of Australia: emdraa.org

Phoenix Australia: phoenixaustralia.org

Source adapted for patient education from "EMDR Therapy: Protocol, Theory, and Research" (Liam Spicer, AAPI presentation, 2024).

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General education only; not individual treatment advice or a claim of EMDR service availability.