

Understanding EMDR Therapy

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Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), what it is, who it can help, and how it works

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) is a form of therapy that helps alleviate emotional distress and symptoms that result from trauma and negative life experiences. It facilitates the processing of these experiences and the strengthening of more positive thoughts relating to troubling life events.

People struggling in the aftermath of distressing life experiences can suffer from a number of disturbing and distressing symptoms. They may feel that they are in life-threatening danger, and feel unsafe in the world. They may hold strong negative beliefs about themselves and distrust others. They may have difficulty concentrating, sleeping, feel isolated and detached from other people, and unable to enjoy life.

Widely recognized, effective treatment

EMDR uses bilateral stimulation to activate two distinct areas of the brain that comprise our emotional networking system: the amygdala, where traumatic events and memories are stored (the area that generates our flight-or-flight response), and an area at the front of the brain that performs what we refer to as executive functions, like planning, organizing, reasoning and controlling emotions. Developed in the 1980s, EMDR is widely recognized as an effective form of treatment for trauma and disturbing life experiences by organizations around the world, including the World Health Organization, The International Society For Traumatic Stress Studies, The American Psychological Association, and many more.

Understanding the impact of trauma and distressing life experiences

In order to understand how EMDR works, it is important to understand trauma, and how

traumatic or distressing emotional experiences can impact us. Virtually anyone could experience or witness a traumatic experience ... a tragic car accident, an act of violence, or a natural disaster. Further, prolonged distressing life experiences — like growing up in a family where physical or emotional abuse repeatedly takes place, or prolonged exposure to neglect or abuse — like a history of negative treatment — can have a negative cumulative effect.

Typically, when something distressing happens to us, we are initially impacted, but eventually, we come to terms with what we have experienced or witnessed. We can use our powers of reasoning to accept what has occurred, see it as an isolated event rather than a repeating threat or pattern. We recover and move on from a distressing experience. But trauma can, at times, impact us very differently. Experiences can remain trapped in the area of change the way the brain responds to threats. Trauma basically blocks our ability to process and move beyond our negative experiences. We can remain stuck and unable to process and recover from a distressing event or series of events. It is when this happens that EMDR can help, by re-establishing a connection — that is to say, creating healthier neuro pathways — between the part of the brain that harbors trauma and the part that can process it.

A multi-phase treatment

Trauma essentially shuts down the neuro pathways between where trauma is stored and where it is processed. EMDR, through an eight-phase treatment, EMDR re-establishes a connection— by clearing blocked neuro pathways — between these two areas of the brain. Re-establishing these pathways allows someone struggling with

trauma to bring in their ability to reason to ease the impact of their traumatic experiences, and decrease the impact and symptoms, bring in resources to decrease feelings of helplessness, and ease memories by decreasing the affect level when triggered. They can begin to see their trauma as an isolated incident rather than an ever-present threat and add in more supporting self-care and resources.

The initial phases of treatment involve exploring and assessing the trauma and preparing for EMDR sessions. The second phase pertains to the EMDR bilateral stimulation sessions (using eye movement and often other forms of bilateral stimulation), where traumas are processed, establishing a peaceful place and wise, protective, nurturing figures, and creating more proactive resources and life strategies. The final stages of treatment involve closure and re-evaluation of the trauma. People suffering from single-incident trauma have reported tremendous results after just one treatment. People suffering from more complex traumas and repeating patterns — anxiety, panic disorders, PTSD, and Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), for example — people experience great relief after a more extended period of treatment.

A healing message

Life is a series of experiences, mostly good, with some bad. For the most part, we take the good with the bad, but sometimes we can become stuck in a deeply troubling experience or series of troubling pattern experiences. As a clinical psychologist specializing in treating trauma, I believe that we are more than our experiences, and more than our pain, and that we are here to live our lives in full, at our highest and best. And in my 25 years of treating patients, I have been privileged to witness profound alleviation of suffering and healing using EMDR in my brave, dedicated and resilient patients.

If you think you or someone you know might benefit from EMDR:

- **Talk** to a family doctor or a primary care physician about accessing treatment. Primary-care physicians can provide tremendous support when seeking mental health treatment.
- **Explore** online resources, like emdrcanada.org, Learn more details about EMDR, its benefits, where to find a therapist who facilitates such therapy and treatment
- **Share** your knowledge of this highly effective treatment if someone you are close to is suffering.



Heal your past, deal with your present
and take control of your future.

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With Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych.



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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness. Her book, A Deeper Wellness, is now available on Amazon, and her in-depth online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, offers powerful mental health guidance, life skills, knowledge and healing, anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/> <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>

