

EMDR: Frequently Asked Questions

What is EMDR? Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a non-drug, non-hypnosis psychotherapy procedure. The therapist guides the client in concentrating on a troubling memory or emotion while moving the eyes rapidly back and forth (by following the therapist's fingers). This rapid eye movement, which occurs naturally during dreaming, seems to speed the client's movement through the healing process.

What is it used for? EMDR is used to treat troubling symptoms such as anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, and post-traumatic reactions. It can also be used to enhance emotional resources such as confidence and self-esteem.

What happens in a session? EMDR is different for everyone, because the healing process is guided from within. Sometimes past issues or memories come up, which are related to the current concern. Sometimes a painful memory brings up unpleasant emotions or body sensations. This is normal and generally passes within a few minutes, as long as the EMDR is not stopped. The upsetting emotion or memory often seems to fade into the past and lose its power.

Why bring up a painful memory? When painful memories are avoided, they keep their disturbing power. However, a flashback or nightmare can feel as upsetting and overwhelming as the original experience, yet not be helpful. In therapy, and with EMDR, you can face the memory in a safe setting, so that you do not feel overwhelmed. Then you can get through it and move on.

Will I be in control? It is hard to predict the thoughts, feelings, or memories that might come up during EMDR. It depends upon each individual's natural healing process. You are always in charge of whether to continue or stop. You can also decide how much to tell the therapist about the experience.

Are there any precautions? Yes. There are specific procedures to be followed depending on your presenting problem, emotional stability, medical condition, and other factors. It is very important that the therapist be formally trained in EMDR. Otherwise, there is a risk that EMDR would be incomplete, ineffective, or even harmful.

What happens afterwards? You may continue to process the material for days or even weeks after the session, perhaps having new insights, vivid dreams, strong feelings, or memory recall. This may feel confusing, but it is just a continuation of the healing process, and should simply be reported to the therapist at the next session. (However, if you become concerned or depressed, you should call your therapist immediately.) As the distressing symptoms fade, you can work with the therapist on developing new skills and ways of coping.

How can I get EMDR treatment? The EMDR International Association maintains a listing of EMDR-certified therapists who have met the highest standards of training and supervised experience. Other referral sources include EMDRIA-approved trainers and local mental health providers.