



Eye Movement Reprocessing and Desensitisation (EMDR)

Background

EMDR is a powerful psychological treatment method that was developed by an American clinical psychologist, Dr Francine Shapiro, in the 1980s. As a Senior Research Fellow at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, USA, she published the first research data to support its benefits in 1989.

Research

There has been a wealth of research conducted demonstrating its benefits in treating psychological trauma and PTSD arising from experiences as diverse as war related experiences, childhood sexual and/or physical abuse or neglect, natural disaster, assault, surgical trauma, road traffic accidents and workplace accidents. Since its original development, EMDR is also increasingly used to help individuals with other issues including phobias, anxiety, pain management, phantom limb pain and depression. EMDR has also been found to be of benefit to children, those with learning difficulties, clients with language barriers or those that can't give details of the trauma.

How does it work?

When a person is involved in a distressing event, they may feel overwhelmed and, therefore, their brain may be unable to process the information like a normal memory. The distressing memory seems to become frozen on a neurological level. When a person recalls the distressing memory, the person can re-experience what they saw, heard, smelt, tasted, thought or felt, and this can be quite intense. Sometimes the memories are so distressing that the person tries to avoid thinking about the distressing event to avoid experiencing the distressing feelings.

Some find that the distressing memories come to mind when something reminds them of the distressing event, or sometimes the memories just seem to just pop into mind without warning. The alternating left-right stimulation of the brain with eye movements, sounds or taps during EMDR, seems to stimulate the frozen or blocked information processing system. In the process the memories seem to lose their intensity, so they become less distressing and seem more like 'ordinary' memories.

The effect is believed to be similar to that which occurs naturally during REM sleep (Rapid Eye Movement) when your eyes rapidly move from side to side. It may also be that getting the client to concentrate on left-right stimulation whilst thinking of the distressing memory stops the brain from becoming overwhelmed and allowing the distressing aspects to be processed. EMDR helps reduce the distress of all the different kinds of memories, whether it is images, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, thoughts or beliefs.