

BROCHURE: What Is EMDR Therapy?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy is a psychotherapy that is effective for resolving emotional difficulties caused by disturbing, difficult, or frightening life experiences. When children are traumatized or have upsetting experiences, the child may lose a sense of control over their lives. This can result in symptoms of anxiety, depression, irritability, anger, guilt, and/or behavioral problems including disruption in eating and/or sleeping. Events such as accidents, abuse, violence, death, and natural disasters are traumatic, but we do not always recognize the ways they affect and influence a child's everyday life. Even common upsetting childhood events, such as divorce, school problems, peer difficulties, failures, and family problems, can deeply affect a child's sense of security, self-esteem, and development.

When an upsetting, scary or painful experience happens, sometimes the memory of the experience stays "stuck" or "frozen" in the mind and body. The experience may return in a distressing and intrusive way and the child may cope by avoiding everything associated with the upsetting experience. For example, a child who has experienced a bad bicycle accident may have repeated nightmares, be fearful of trying new things, and avoid things that are associated with a bicycle.

Most experts agree that the best way to get "unstuck" and become free from the symptoms is through exposure to the traumatic experience. This means the person will work through facing the memories or troubling events until they are no longer disturbing.

Bilateral stimulation refers to the use of alternating, right-left tracking that may take the form of eye movements, tones or music delivered to each ear, or tactile stimulation, such as alternating hand taps. Creative alternatives have been developed for children that incorporate BLS through the use of puppets, stories, dance, art, and even swimming.

EMDR therapy helps resolve the troubling thoughts and feelings related to the distressing memories so that children can return to their normal developmental tasks and prior levels of coping. In addition, EMDR therapy can help to strengthen feelings of confidence, calmness and mastery.

What Is EMDR Therapy Like?

EMDR therapy is 8 phases of treatment that integrates the tools and skills from play therapy, talk therapy, behavior therapy and family therapy.

A typical EMDR therapy session begins in a positive way by having children learn skills for emotional regulation and self-soothing. The initial sessions are focused on building a positive relationship with the therapist and teaching children skills for coping. The therapist will also teach the child about feelings and explain what to expect during a session.

Next, the child is asked to bring up an upsetting memory or event that is related to the presenting problem. DAS is used again while the child focuses on the disturbing experience. When an upsetting memory is "desensitized" the child can face the past events without feeling disturbed, frightened, or avoidant. "Reprocessing" simply means that new understandings, sensations, and feelings can be paired up with the old disturbing thoughts, feelings and images. After EMDR treatment, the troubling memories can be more comfortably recalled as "just something that happened," and children can more easily believe, "It's over." "I'm safe now." "I did the best I could, it's not my fault." and "I have other choices now."

How Does EMDR Therapy Work?

In 1987, psychologist Francine Shapiro, Ph.D. made the chance observation that, under certain conditions, eye movements can reduce the intensity of negative, disturbing thoughts. Since her initial discovery, there have been more controlled research studies investigating EMDR than any other trauma therapy. Reviewers around the world agree that EMDR is effective in the treatment of traumatic events.

This revolutionary therapy has been adapted and modified for children and has been used worldwide to help children through a variety of different problems and circumstances. There are hundreds of case reports and ongoing research on the positive effects of using EMDR therapy with children. EMDR therapy has also been used to treat children after large-scale traumatic events, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, Hurricane Andrew, the shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the tragedy of September 11th, for AIDS Orphans in Africa – all with positive results including improvement in symptoms and overall health of the child.

While it is not clear how eye movements or other forms of bilateral stimulation (BLS) work (e.g., hand taps or tones), ongoing investigations continue. We do know that the BLS component is not hypnosis; it may be that eye movements work similarly to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, where certain information is processed. Additionally, it is possible that BLS produces a relaxation response or a distraction that helps children relax rather than avoid facing disturbing events. Others think that the BLS may help bring all parts of the brain/mind together, and therefore, allow for access to the body's natural healing mechanisms.

Can EMDR Therapy Help My Child?

EMDR Therapy can be used with children and adolescents of all ages. Case reports indicate that EMDR Therapy has been used successfully with infants and toddlers, as well as with teens who do not want to talk about the upsetting issues.

As with any psychotherapy, the younger the child or the more avoidant the child, the more challenging it is to find ways to engage them and focus their attention on the problem. It is helpful for parents and professionals to explain that EMDR Therapy is a way to get over troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. EMDR therapy has been used to help children deal with traumatic events, depression, anxiety, phobias, and a variety of other behavioral problems.

EMDR therapy unfolds differently for each child, because the healing process is guided from within. Some children report that EMDR therapy is relaxing and have an immediate positive response. Other children may feel tired at the end of a session. Some children will be agitated and dysregulated for the first few days after a trauma reprocessing session, but the benefit from the treatment comes in the days to follow. For example, after EMDR therapy treatment, a ten-year-old who wore a body cast for a year and was preoccupied with injury, illness, and death due to a traumatic accident, began crying tears of joy and stated, "I'm so happy, it really is over and I am strong!" A five-year-old who had behavioral problems and had worked with his therapist using other kinds of therapy, tried EMDR and stated, "Why didn't you do this with me before?" An eight-year-old who suffered from repeated nightmares stated, "They just popped out of my head, the monsters are gone." Other children say little at all, but their behavior changes and parents state: "Things are back on track."