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The Power of EMDR©

The Transformative Power of EMDR - Eye
Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

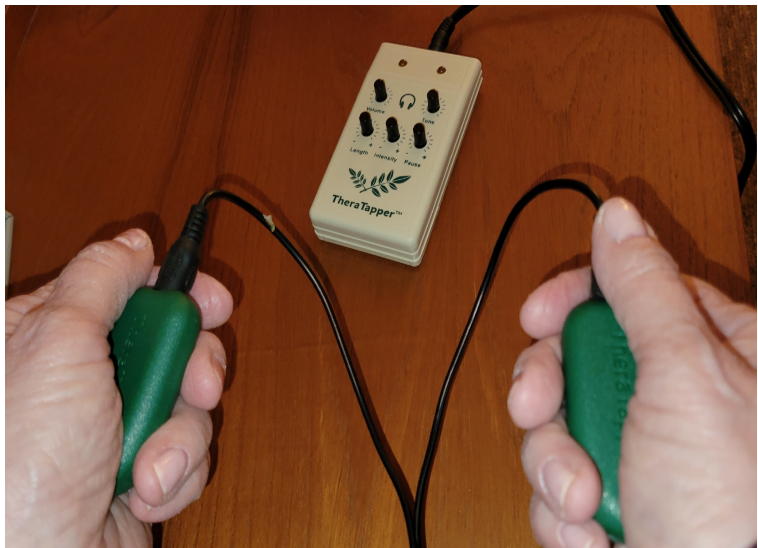
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EMDR is probably the most researched method for healing traumatic memories. Since the first research was published in 1989, hundreds of studies have shown it to be a safe, accelerated, highly effective method. EMDR has been found effective in removing two upsetting qualities of painful memories, namely, how intrusive they can be and how much anxiety they arouse. Clients with PTSD before EMDR generally no longer have PTSD afterwards. Lastly, it is a relatively rapid treatment.

We at Shorehaven have an EMDR clinical team so we can offer access to EMDR rapidly. The team works together to study advanced EMDR protocols and the latest research and to bring this remarkable therapy to as many people as we can. We want to introduce EMDR.

EMDR transforms the experience of individuals in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. EMDR therapy is predicated on the principle that the mind can heal from psychological trauma. However, the overwhelming quality of pathogenic memories, trauma memories and anxiety-inducing memories prevents the cortex from resolving those memories. They become, in essence, stuck in the nervous system. They retain vividness that makes them seem as though they happened yesterday rather than ages ago.

Perhaps you have memories such as these drawn from client examples:



TheraTapper is one of the devices that may be used in EMDR. The green bulbs vibrate from side to side in order to stimulate the left-right coordination of the brain.

Driving on the highway, a semi-trailer failed to see the small car. Edging over, the big wheels of the rig moved closer and rammed into the car, running it into the concrete barrier. The car careened across two lanes, ending in the wrong direction, when it was stuck at high speed. The client, sitting on the same side as the semi, saw it coming at him, a looming danger. Although he suffered only minor injuries, the images were so vivid that he had not driven on the highway in the seven years since the accident. The thought of doing so caused high anxiety.

From the ages of 8 through 12, the client was molested by an older step-brother. When she told her mother, she was accused of lying in order to cause trouble. As an adult, she never felt safe from being assaulted, and she avoided dating. The thought of intimacy caused her such anxiety that she wanted to hide.

Receiving a call that her sister had a medical emergency, the client drove to the house. She arrived as the ambulance was taking her sister into the vehicle. She realized her sister had died. The image haunted her. She could not release the guilt that she had not been there in time.

A frequent image is of a person who is in the hospital, hooked up to monitors and tubes, dying. The grief-stricken client has this painful image in mind. It is blocking griefwork and causing Prolonged Grief Disorder.

A man was a medic in the army in Iraq. The squad came under fire. Medics were lightly armed. He was sure he would not survive until a helicopter could extricate him. He was saved, but the result was an inner numbness, being overcome by the fragility of life, and a severely traumatizing memory that interfered with his ability to be an engaged spouse and parent.

We have used EMDR with these and dozens of other kinds of painful memories and any number of anxiety-causing images. We also find it effective with the images that cause depression.

To be highly upsetting, the memory does not have to rise to the level of a trauma memory. All of us has key moments growing up that still affect us, still shape our beliefs about ourselves in the world, still cause anxiety when recalled.

Numerous studies validate the effectiveness and speed with which EMDR helps us heal from most cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and many other problems.

Understanding EMDR Therapy

EMDR is designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories through a structured eight-phase treatment process. We take a history of the person and the problems, find out about the unpleasant experiences, explain the therapy, and then use bilateral stimuli (BLS) to desensitize the painful memory. BLS can be moving the eyes from

side to side, tapping on the knees in an alternating pattern, feeling vibrating hand-held pads that vibrate left-right left-right, or listening to sounds presented to the ears in an alternating pattern.

Bi-Lateral Stimulation. The first photo shows a TheraTapper, which causes the green bulbs to vibrate in an alternating pattern. The device also presents tones through headphones, again alternating ears. These methods can be used instead of eye movements. The second photo shows a Lightbar. All it does is send a series of green lights back and forth. The lights are easy for your eyes to follow. You would just tap on your upper arms or upper legs in an alternating pattern. Or you could follow the therapist's fingers moving across your visual field. It is the bilateral, that is, two-sided, stimulation that leads the brain to re-process the memory in the safe space of the therapy office. All these methods work.



The Lightbar has a series of lights that move from side to side. It's another tool used in EMDR. By moving your eyes in time to the moving lights, your left and right sides of the brain integrate the painful memory in a new, less painful way.

Painful memories are virtually always associated with negative thoughts about ourselves. For example, we might think what happened was our fault when it was not. We may think of what happened and think, "I am helpless," or "I am alone." EMDR transforms those thoughts into more positive ideas.

We understand BLS activates brain systems that store the painful memory. As a result of the desensitization, the brain's information processing system re-activates and reconsolidates the memory in new ways. Memory reconsolidation is considered one of the major ways psychotherapy heals.

The Multifaceted Benefits of EMDR Therapy

Accelerated Recovery: significant results in a shorter time frame. Many people who have experienced a single traumatic event often recover in just a few sessions. This expedited process can be particularly beneficial for individuals seeking rapid relief from the symptoms of PTSD and other related conditions.

C-PTSD. For a single trauma or a few painful memories, therapy is rapid. There is a more complicated condition called Complex PTSD in which the person experienced unremitting stress and traumatic experiences in childhood. These memories have, in effect, distorted the person's development. That may have caused a more severe mental disorder, such as Borderline Personality. No one therapeutic approach heals such drastic trauma. However, EMDR can be an invaluable tool as part of a group of therapies, including Dialectical Behavior Therapy (see our webpage on DBT), Psychodynamic Therapy, Schema Therapy, and medications, that can help people with C-PTSD.

Reduction of Trauma-Related Symptoms: EMDR therapy has been shown to effectively reduce, and in some cases eliminate, the intensity of traumatic memories. Patients often report a decrease in the vividness and emotional charge of their traumatic memories after undergoing EMDR treatment.

Enhanced Emotional Stability: By processing traumatic memories, EMDR therapy helps individuals achieve a greater sense of emotional stability. Patients often experience improved mood, reduced anxiety, and increased self-esteem as a result of the treatment.

Minimized Reliance on Verbalization: For individuals who may find it challenging to articulate their traumatic experiences, EMDR therapy offers an alternative approach that does not rely heavily on verbal expression. This aspect can be particularly advantageous for those who may feel overwhelmed or re-traumatized by discussing their experiences.

Comprehensive Treatment Approach: EMDR therapy not only addresses the symptoms associated with trauma but also focuses on the underlying memories that contribute to psychological distress. This comprehensive approach facilitates a holistic healing process.

A Case Example: Maria's Journey Through EMDR Therapy

Maria, a 35-year-old woman, sought treatment for severe anxiety and flashbacks stemming from a car accident she had experienced five years prior. Despite her initial skepticism after conventional therapy had provided limited relief, she agreed to try EMDR therapy. During the course of her EMDR sessions, Maria focused on the memory of the accident while her therapist guided her through bilateral stimulation exercises. As the sessions progressed, Maria noticed a significant decrease in the intensity of her flashbacks. The memories of the accident, once vivid and distressing, began to feel more distant and less emotionally charged. By the end of her treatment, Maria reported feeling a newfound sense of peace and resilience. She was able to recall the accident without the overwhelming anxiety that had plagued her for years. Then she could drive in the area where the accident occurred with no anxiety or avoidance.

A Case Example: Max's Journey Through EMDR Therapy

Max, a 45 year-old man, experienced frequent bullying during high school. To correct scoliosis, he wore a back brace during freshman year. He also had severe acne. The teasing was apparently relentless. The effect was to cause him not to join any clubs or teams. He didn't date. His only long-term relationship with a woman occurred after college. But he was so insecure that he expected it to fail and he expected to be left. His subsequent jealousy ruined the relationship. He has an inferiority complex. That, in turn, affected his career, limiting him from advancement. EMDR therapy helped overcome memories of the bullying. But, notice the 30 years of emotional damage and accumulating problems caused by the bullying. It took a long course of therapy over a few years to overcome all the harm to his self-worth and to reprocess all the upsetting experiences. In the end Max found a satisfying job, joined Toastmasters where he could get up to speak in meetings, and found a partner through an online dating app.

Conclusion

EMDR therapy is a highly effective treatment for trauma and PTSD, as well as depression, anxiety, and many other problems, offering hope and healing to those burdened by the weight of their past experiences. Its ability to facilitate rapid processing of traumatic memories, coupled with its comprehensive treatment approach, makes it a valuable tool in the field of psychotherapy. For individuals like Maria, EMDR therapy has paved the way for a life free from the shackles of trauma, underscoring the transformative power of this therapeutic modality.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. Our DBT program has three groups – for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and adults – and has openings. We also accept referrals for substance abuse care from clinicians who are not comfortable with that population. Call 414-540-2170.

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