

# Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

## Information for people who use our services

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### What is it?

EMDR is a psychological therapy that was developed by American Psychologist, Francine Shapiro in the 1980s. It has been well researched since then and has been found to benefit people who have experienced difficulty adjusting to traumatic events, for example war related experiences, natural disasters, road traffic accidents, assaults, childhood sexual and/or physical abuse. It benefits both children and adults and is one of the treatments recommended by the National Institute for Health & Care Excellence (NICE) for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is not counselling or psychoanalysis, nor is it a form of hypnosis - you remain conscious and in control at all times.

### How does it work?

We are not 100% sure how EMDR works but an adaptive information processing model is used to understand it. Usually, when we receive information from our senses it passes through an emotional filter in the right half of the brain and then moves through the hippocampus which processes the information and allows it to move into the left side of the brain where it is stored in memory.

When the information that we receive is from an emotionally charged traumatic experience, for some people it can get stuck in the right hemisphere of the brain and therefore doesn't get processed. Consequently the person often recalls the distressing memory and experiences it as if it is happening again. This can be in the form of nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive images and sometimes these memories are so distressing that the person tries to avoid thinking about them in order to avoid experiencing the level of intense distress that goes along with it. Sometimes people find these memories are triggered by things that remind them of the event and at other times memories just pop into mind.

During the process of EMDR alternating left to right eye movements, sounds or taps are used to stimulate the blocked information processing system. It is believed that the bi-lateral stimulation of the brain in EMDR therapy enables the traumatic information to be processed and as such move to the left side of the brain where it can be stored as normal memory. It does not remove the memory from your mind, but enables the distressing memories to lose the intensity of the emotion that is associated with them so that they become more like ordinary memories.

## What actually happens in an EMDR Session?

Your EMDR therapist will talk with you about EMDR in order that you can make a decision about whether or not you feel this therapy is right for you. They will want to know about the difficulties you have relating to the trauma(s) and how this is affecting your current life. They will make sure that you have some relaxation techniques that you can use to help you cope with any distress that you may experience in between sessions. A questionnaire will be used pre and post treatment and you will also be asked to rate certain things, for example how distressed you feel on a scale of 1-10. The therapist will work with you to briefly describe the trauma that you wish to deal with, which will include an image from the trauma, negative and positive beliefs, emotions and physical sensations associated with it. The actual EMDR processing phase will involve eye movements, tapping or sounds, will last from between 60 to 90 minutes and will be completed either in person or online. The therapist will ask you to bring to mind an observer image of your experience along with your negative statement, emotions and physical sensations and you will be asked to notice this whilst experiencing the bi-lateral stimulation. When the stimulation finishes the therapist will ask you to take a deep breath, breathe out slowly and then tell them what you notice. Your therapist may ask a question or ask you to go on with what you have noticed, with more sets of bilateral stimulation and this will be repeated several times. As you move through treatment the therapist will link your positive statements with the imagery. Your therapist will always make sure that you feel ok to leave the session. The most common method of delivery used in the CWH Counselling Service is through a worksheet called GTEP. You will usually only need a maximum of 3 sessions.

## What will I feel like after the session?

As EMDR enables the processing of traumatic events people often describe feeling emotionally and physically tired after the session. Processing does not necessarily confine itself to sessions and can continue when the session has finished, therefore some people may notice that in between sessions memories come to mind or there may be an increase in the number of nightmares or imagery experienced. During this time it is recommended that you take care of yourself, make sure that you are safe and use relaxation techniques. If you experience anything in-between sessions keep a note of it and discuss it with your therapist when you next see them.

## How long will my therapy take?

It is hard to predict as everyone is different. For example, some people find that they experience significant improvement in up to 6 sessions whereas others have EMDR as part of a longer term treatment plan.

## What should I consider before deciding on EMDR?

EMDR processing is often upsetting and sometimes people can become distressed in-between sessions. Consequently it would be inadvisable to undertake a course of EMDR when your life circumstances are such that you would not be able to keep yourself safe if needed in-between sessions, or you were unable to attend all the sessions required consistently. Drinking a lot of alcohol or taking certain drugs prevents processing from happening; therefore the therapy would not be effective and in that case would not be suitable for you at that time. You should make sure that your therapist is trained in EMDR and has a professional training in one of the mental health fields e.g. mental health nursing, clinical psychology, psychiatry. You should feel free to ask your therapist about their training and experience in working with difficulties that you may have.

## Do I need to do anything to prepare for EMDR?

Although not essential, it can be helpful to have practiced relaxation and self-nurturing activities as well as having an understanding of the fear response and the impact this has on anxiety. If you have not done this, your therapist will go through these activities with you. Preparation is an important part of the process and will be completed thoroughly with your therapist prior to EMDR processing.

## Your feedback

If you need information in a different language or format or have a concern, compliment or complaint, then please contact our PALS Team:

Email: **[rduh.PALS-eastern@nhs.net](mailto:rduh.PALS-eastern@nhs.net)** (Exeter Site)

Email: **[rduh.PALS-northern@nhs.net](mailto:rduh.PALS-northern@nhs.net)** (Northern Site)

You will also find useful information about our services and issues related to mental health and wellbeing on our website.

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