
EMDR: The Psychotherapy of The 21st Century

By Dania Dbaibo Darwish

Many of you have been hearing lately about EMDR as an approach to therapy, but perhaps most don't know what it means, or exactly how it goes yet. EMDR is an abbreviation for "Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing"; and EMDR therapists are often fascinated by its wonders whether in speed of healing, or its long-term positive effects. Research after research keeps documenting how efficient EMDR is for a variety of psychological problems not restricted any longer to dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as when it was first introduced. EMDR combines components of many different other therapeutic approaches, but it's most unique in working on a neurological level that is often felt directly by the recipient.

Most of us have experienced stressful life events, or have been traumatized one way or another. It could be witnessing war, physical or emotional abuse, illness, bullying, betrayal, accidents, or any other shocking or debilitating experience. And just like the natural healing mechanism that operates directly when we have a physical wound, we, also, have another healing mechanism that runs the same for psychological wounds. It all starts in our brain as I will shortly brief. Take for instance the sudden death of a loved one. At first, it would be dreadful and unbearable, but with time, we gradually start recovering and eventually we accept the loss (or maybe not). They say "time heals", but in reality, it is our brain's diligent effort trying to make sense of what happened that helps you heal *with time*.

One theory explaining how EMDR works is mimicking what happens as we sleep at night during REM sleep (which is Rapid Eye Movement - one of the stages of sleep) in which our eyes start moving rapidly from side to side continuously for some time. We go through this phase maybe 5 times if we slept 7 to 8 hours. During REM sleep, our brain is very active, but we have sleep paralysis and we can't move. Apparently, this is the time at night when our brains process information, consolidate our memories, try to find solutions for our problem, etc.... For overwhelming experiences (& perhaps just like some machines), our brains can get jammed unable to work properly. Consequently, the stressful event continues to have a negative impact on us in different ways. It becomes like heavy baggage we carry on our shoulders too much to bare affecting our daily living. It's like there's an ongoing alarm system put on whenever that event is remembered. It could, also be triggered by anything that resembles it, or is related to it.

Take a moment to think of a really bad memory.....

Be with it for a moment Scan how it makes you feel in your body

If that memory still triggers a disturbing physical sensation in your body, then this is how you know it's not resolved yet. It is not healed. If it doesn't have any physical traces, then that's great! Your brain has successfully processed it. Now take a moment to think back of the best memory you've had in your entire life before you continue reading (I don't want you to stay stuck in traumatic material).

The body keeps score so it's been said. These negative memories if not processed right, remain stored in their raw form (just as things first happened). They were not integrated with more empowering memories in the brain's memory network, so continue to feel disturbing in our system. When the stressful event first happens, it creates a negative belief, or a negative evaluation of the self like for instance "I'm not safe" for someone assaulted, or "I'm not good enough" for someone bullied. This negative belief lingers on with that memory handicapping the person from progressing in their life in a healthy way. You can't do well in life if deep inside you had a negative self-view.

A therapist trained in EMDR helps the recipient unload such baggage by resolving these stressful memories one at a time. The recipient is asked to focus on the traumatic memory with all its related components (image, negative belief, emotions, and sensations) and then follow the therapist's fingers moving the eyes from side to side for like half a minute only to report briefly the changes experienced. It's like nudging the brain to start working on the memory to heal it. The process of bilateral brain stimulation repeats until the person is no longer bothered physically by the memory. This is when we know the memory is processed and there's a shift into more positive thinking about what happened. New learning emerges that strengthens a more positive belief system as it connects with existing more empowering memories. It's worth mentioning that eye movement isn't the only means to kick start the brain to heal from the memory's emotional impact. EMDR therapists are using auditory and kinesthetic bilateral brain stimulation to get that same effect.

In EMDR, a therapist doesn't ask "what's wrong with you?"; rather "what happened to you?" The client may want to deal with one presenting problem, or many. Each problem has its history in life events that happened at some point. There are many ways to dig for these, link and lump them together in themes, and resolve these according to the client's priorities. There's focus on healing the past; eliminating the effects of present triggers; and preparing the client with better capabilities to handle the future. When we think about what people usually struggle with (like depression, anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, self-esteem issues, relationship problems, etc...), all usually result from upsetting life experiences. A comprehensive work when doing EMDR to resolve all these usually leaves clients feeling transformed into a better more empowered version of themselves.

A word of caution: It is very important to seek a well-trained EMDR therapist if ever you consider dealing with your problems using EMDR. EMDR cannot be learned in a day or two course (although such courses are sometimes on offer purely for financial gain). Qualified therapists undergo a period that could span a year and a half. The training moves them into more advanced levels as they get supervision by EMDR consultants to fine tune their skills. EMDR is not a *technique* that psychologists, or non-psychologists can easily use. Because we do not know what each person can hide, repressed traumas can emerge during the process that only experienced clinical psychologists would be well equipped to handle. It is advised, therefore, to be in safer hands if ever you want to deal with your baggage. Please check your therapist's credentials before you start the process.

With my regards,

Dania Dbaibo Darwish

