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EMDR – A Growing Treatment for Mental Health

Thursday, October 10, 2024 is World Mental Health Day. The overall objective of this day, as stated by the World Health Organization, is *"to raise awareness of mental health issues around the world and to mobilize efforts in support of mental health"*.

Therefore, today's ReFresh explores **Eye Movement and Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy**, a form of therapy that is designed to help individuals process negative thoughts and/or trauma and move forward in life. EMDR helps us understand where we carry anxiety and trauma in our memories and bodies.

Principals and Vice-Principals are cognitive, analytical individuals, who are resilient in dealing with the day-to-day complexities of their jobs. In my role, I often encounter members who are strong and resilient for a long time, hanging in until they really struggle emotionally and psychologically. This may be the point at which they access counselling, and this counselling is often based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). This is a great type of therapy to help process things cognitively; however, our members may have already done a fair amount of 'cognitive analysis' of their thinking patterns while continuing under strain for a significant time. At this stage, CBT is many times not enough to get members 'unstuck' and moving forward, so other therapies, including EMDR, may instead be helpful. I have connected with BCPVPA members who have tried EMDR, and who have provided positive feedback on their results participating in this process.

What is EMDR

EMDR relies on the Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) model, a theory about how your brain stores memories. This theory, developed by Francine Shapiro, PhD, recognizes that your brain stores normal and traumatic memories differently.

During normal events, your brain smoothly files away memories. These memories are also networked to connect to other happenings you remember. But, during disturbing or upsetting events, that networking may not happen in the same way. The brain can go 'offline', which may result in a disconnect between what you experience (feel, hear, see) and what your brain stores in memory through language. That memory does not get 'filed' away – it remains 'stuck' and can continue to be triggering. It can be like a wound that your brain hasn't been permitted to heal; because it didn't have the opportunity to heal – to be 'filed' away – your brain doesn't receive the message that the danger is over. This improper storage causes your mind to continue to access these memories in a way that may be uncontrolled, distorted, and overpowering, with the feeling that the event is repeating in the present moment.

How does EMDR work

When you undergo EMDR, you access those 'unfiled' memories of a traumatic event in very specific ways. By combining eye movements and/or other forms of rhythmic left-right (bilateral) stimulation, along with guided directions from your EMDR therapist, you briefly access those memories and then reprocess what you remember from the negative event. This reprocessing helps to 'repair' the mental injury from that memory, and to reduce the vividness and emotions linked to that memory, ideally, enabling the related feelings to become more manageable.

We invite you to watch this video: [How EMDR Psychotherapy works in your brain](#)

What types of conditions can benefit from EMDR

EMDR has been predominantly used for treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, mental healthcare providers also use it in the treatment of the following conditions:

- **Anxiety disorders**
- **Depression disorders**
- **Dissociative disorders**
- **Eating disorders**
- **Gender dysphoria**
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorders**
- **Personality disorders**
- **Trauma disorders (PTSD and Adjustment disorder)**

An individual can expect this therapy to take between three and six sessions to address a single disturbing event or memory. More complex or longer-term traumas may take eight to 12 sessions, or more.

EMDR therapy uses a structured eight-phase approach that includes:

- Phase 1: History-taking
- Phase 2: Preparing the client
- Phase 3: Assessing the target memory
- Phases 4-7: Processing the memory to adaptive resolution
- Phase 8: Evaluating treatment results

Here is a video that explains the 8 phases from a child's perspective!

[What is EMDR? \(A Child Friendly Explanation Video\)](#)

What are the advantages and disadvantages of EMDR?

EMDR has several advantages:

- Studies have proven that EMDR is usually effective.
- It tends to work faster than other forms of therapy, and you may experience results sooner than with other forms of therapy.
- It involves less homework between sessions.
- It may be less stressful than other therapies, as EMDR focuses on processing and moving past your trauma versus a need to describe and relive negative events.

EMDR has several disadvantages:

- It is unlikely to help if you have a mental health condition due to an inherited condition, an injury, or another physical effect on your brain.
- EMDR is still relatively theoretical. Experts are still not fully able to explain why it works, despite evidence indicating it does.
- It is a new method, and more research is necessary to understand whether EMDR is a long-term solution.

Conclusion

Is EMDR the right therapy for you? Talk to your physician or counsellor. It may be worth considering if you have been going to talk therapy for a while, and you find that you are not progressing. EMDR may then be just the support you need to get you 'unstuck' and feeling better!

[Here is a website](#) that explains EMDR further, and helps you find an EMDR clinician in Canada:

Sources:

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22641-emdr-therapy>

<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/eye-movement-reprocessing>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.