

WHAT IS EMDR?

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing. It was created by Dr Shapiro in the 90's and since then there have been over 44 scientific studies supporting its use as a therapy. EMDR is recommended by the NHS for treating PTSD and it's also recommended worldwide. It's a safe and effective treatment for stress and trauma.



How does EMDR work?

Every time we experience something, we take in information about it. This comes to us through our senses and is based on what we are seeing/hearing etc at the time. EMDR is based on a framework which describes how we process this. The information travels from our eyes/ears etc up to our brain through our nervous system. Most of the time this information travels from these different places, is tied together in our brain and gets filed away neatly in our long term memory. It's a bit like a jigsaw, our brain takes the pieces, creates the picture, and files it away. EMDR says that this system naturally creates healthy memories unless it's disrupted. This is like our skin healing over when we get a cut unless there's dirt in the wound.

Our brain doesn't store memories alphabetically, it stores them by association. This means that if one of the senses in one memory is similar to that sense in another memory, the brain will link them together. For example, if you heard a certain song at a school disco and then the same song at a house party, your brain would link those memories. Or if a family member wore a certain perfume and then you met someone who wore the same perfume, your brain would link those memories

When we go through something distressing, however, the information coming from our senses can be really intense. This makes it difficult for our brain to tie it all together and file it neatly away. But the information has entered our body and doesn't just disappear. This means that it is still stored somewhere in our body. Because it hasn't been filed away, this storage is unstable and can be activated easily in the form of a flashback.

When triggered, these unstable memories influence our emotions, our bodily responses and the way we think about what's going on right now.



Why does it involve eye movement?

Other activities can also be used like tapping or listening to a soundtrack and these work in a similar way. There are several theories about why they are important and it's likely that the 'true answer' is a combination of these. Dr Jeffries writes that eye movements helps people stay aware of the here and now. This helps them not get overwhelmed by the memory that's being processed. In essence, eye movements helps people keep one foot in the past and one foot in the present. Because therapy happens in a calm and safe environment, keeping one foot in the present helps people feel safe whilst processing distressing content.

Professor van den Hout writes that eye movements takes up some of peoples attention span, stopping them getting overwhelmed. For most people, their attention span has 7 'slots' available (some have a couple more, some a couple less). When a distressing memory is activated, it can fill up all 7 slots and feel overwhelming. If eye movements can fill up 3 or 4 of those slots, that prevents the memory from taking over and becoming overwhelming.

Dr Perry also says that rhythm and eye movements are naturally calming, meaning that they can stop us getting overwhelmed when processing distressing content.

As seen in all the above theories, the aim of eye movements is to help prevent people feeling overwhelmed while processing distressing memories. Remember that our processing system is geared towards creating a healthy memory and filing it away neatly unless it gets disrupted. The core of EMDR is that if we can help people not to feel overwhelmed, they naturally have the ability to process these memories and come to a healthy conclusion. Simply put, EMDR helps remove the things that block clients natural healing process.



What will it involve?

A course of EMDR will start by identifying the things in life that are currently difficult to manage. We will then identify the memories which are associated with these situations, including the earliest memory, as this is where our journey began. These memories will be processed using eye movements or similar activities. You will not be asked to re-live the memories or describe them in great detail to the therapist. We will then reprocess the current situations that we started with and then finish by planning for how we would like to manage these situations in the future.

