

What is EMDR?

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with bilateral eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation.

One of the key elements of EMDR is “dual stimulation.” During treatment, you are asked to think or talk about memories, triggers, and painful emotions while simultaneously focusing on your therapist’s moving finger or another form of bilateral stimuli.

In a typical EMDR therapy session, you focus on traumatic memories and associated negative emotions and beliefs while tracking your therapist’s moving finger with your eyes as it moves back and forth across your field of vision.

Other forms of external stimuli that may be used in EMDR therapy include bilateral tactile sensations and sounds (e.g. alternating hand taps or a chime that pans back and forth from ear to ear).

How does EMDR therapy work?

At the time of a traumatic event, strong emotions interfere with our ability to completely process the experience and one moment becomes “frozen in time.” Recalling the traumatic event may feel as though the person is reliving the event all over again because the images, smells, sounds, and feelings are still there and can be triggered in the present. When activated, these memories cause a negative impact on our daily functioning and interfere with the way we see ourselves and our world, and how we relate to others.

EMDR therapy appears to directly affect the brain, “unfreezing” the traumatic memories, allowing you to resolve them. Over time the disturbing memory and associated beliefs, feelings, sensations become “digested” or worked through until you are able to think about the event without reliving it. The memory is still there, but it is less upsetting. The exact mechanism for the effectiveness of EMDR is yet unknown. It appears that using rapid eye movements relieves the anxiety associated with the trauma so that the original event can be examined from a more detached perspective, somewhat like watching a movie of what happened. This enables you to access positive ways of reframing the original trauma (reprocessing), and to release the body’s stored negative emotional charges around it (desensitization). Some experts have noted that the eye movements involved in EMDR might be similar to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. It may be thought of as a physiologically-based therapy that allows a person to see material in a new and less distressing way. Others believe it reactivates parts of the brain that were “shut down” as a coping mechanism. In this way *cognitive reorganizing* takes place, allowing the negative, painful emotions to give way to more resolved, empowered feelings.