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Practical Counseling for your busy life

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

Do you ever look back upon something that once happened to you and tell yourself, “I don’t know why I keep thinking about it” or “why is this still bothering me, it’s all in the past.” Have you ever found yourself trying to stop memories from resurfacing? Or have you ever compared your past experiences as being “not that bad” compared to others? If so, then EMDR may be helpful.

So what is EMDR anyway?

EMDR is a type of therapy that can help people recover from painful past memories. EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. EMDR was discovered by psychologist Francine Shapiro in 1987. She realized, while out on a walk one day, that painful memories were somehow made less painful when she moved her eyes back and forth. She decided to test this in a clinical setting and after years of research, developed what has come to be known as EMDR. Her research showed that a process called bilateral stimulation, alternately stimulating the right and left side of the brain, either through eye movements, ring tones or tapping, somehow accelerates the healing process. Clients who focused on painful memories while receiving bilateral stimulation from the therapist, found that the physical and emotional pain associated with the memory decreased dramatically.

Why Painful Memories seem to get Stuck

Our everyday experiences get stored into our adaptive memory networks. You go through your day, your experiences get “saved” into your memory, similar to how data gets saved on a hard drive in a computer. Later on, you have the ability to recall some or all of this information. But with painful experiences, memory does not get saved the same way. Painful memories tend to get “frozen” in place as if the memory is saved in the present tense instead of a past event. This is why you may find you remember a past experience as if it is happening right now. Or when you find a current stressor is making you remember your past pain, and consequently, making that current stressor worse. Although no one knows exactly how EMDR works in your brain, research indicates that EMDR somehow helps “unfreeze” these painful memories and helps them become part of your past history instead of an event you relive over and over.

What is an EMDR session like?

When working with an EMDR therapist, first, you will decide, with your therapist which memories to work on getting “unstuck”. Doing EMDR will require that you bring up the memory, along with any thoughts, feelings and physical sensations (such as tightness in your stomach) that you may have. Once you are able to do this, your therapist will begin the bilateral stimulation. At this point, you just pay attention and notice any thoughts, feelings, and sensations that come up. Although this may sound frightening, your therapist is there to help keep you from getting overwhelmed. Every few minutes, your therapist will stop the bilateral movements to check in with you and you briefly report on what is happening. After several sets of bilateral stimulation, you should find your feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness decreasing. Your therapist will check in with you periodically to rate how you are feeling. If you are feeling worse or if nothing is changing, let your therapist know.

How is EMDR different from regular “talk therapy”?

You may have gone to regular talk therapy before to talk about what happened to you. You may have found that talking about it over and over did not seem to help much in terms of changing what you think about what happened to you. You may have felt better just telling your story or feeling validated and understood, but beyond that, still feel as if you live with the problem every day. EMDR uses a different approach. Much of EMDR is non-verbal. Once you and your therapist decide which memory to work on, when you process the thoughts, emotions and feelings that come up, you are not required to describe everything that happened. By not talking and letting your brain do the work, it seems to allow processing to happen much more quickly. Many clients who have done EMDR for “single event” problems such as car crashes or muggings, have reported relief in 1-3 sessions. The number of sessions needed varies from person to person and depending on the nature of the problem targeted. Long-standing past problems tend to require more time spent processing.

What kind of problems can EMDR treat?

EMDR is highly effective for problems with anxiety and worry. EMDR is a treatment of choice for post-traumatic stress disorder. It is also used to treat: panic attacks, phobias, performance anxiety, complicated grief, pain disorders, stress reduction and more.