

What is EMDR?

by Barbara Horne (adapted)

EMDR is a therapy that was developed in the 1980's in the United States. It was first used with combat veterans suffering from PTSD, but has quickly come to be useful in eliminating all the symptoms associated with stress and trauma (from PTSD symptoms like flashbacks, panic attacks, intrusive thoughts, anxiety and phobias, through the continuum to depression, over-reactive anger, worrying, disturbed sleep and so on – anything we're referring to when we say we're "stressed out").

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, but actually it doesn't have anything to do with the eyes! It's a therapy where you think about something that bothers you (like a traumatic memory or issue) and I wave my hand in front of your eyes, back and forth. I say it has nothing to do with the eyes because we've found that we can get the same treatment effects with a headset and alternating beeps, or alternating taps on the hands. The eye movements, beeps or taps are a "back and forth" or bilateral stimulation (BLS) of the brain. The idea is that traumatic memories sometimes get "stuck" in the information-processing system of the brain, along with the emotions and even the physical sensations that went with the original experience. When something bad happens, it happens first to the body, then the emotions kick in and then you start to "reprocess" the event – you think about it, sleep on it, get support, time passes etc. At the end of that reprocessing, you can still remember the bad event, but it no longer bothers you – I'm sure that you can think of bad things that have happened to you in your life, and you still remember them, but you have peace with them. That's an example of the brain working the way it should. But sometimes this reprocessing gets stuck, and the event is held in memory along with its emotional & physical content, and this is where EMDR comes in. It "desensitizes and reprocesses" the difficult memory or issue so that you have peace with it.

We don't know exactly what is happening in the brain during EMDR – we think it might have to do with the same thing your brain is doing during the dream stage of sleep (REM sleep). EMDR might be a kind of accelerated, conscious version of REM sleep. It has been extensively studied, and validated by regulating and governmental bodies in the United States and around the world.

During an EMDR session, you think about the issue or traumatic memory and we do a number of "sets" of BLS. It's useful to use the metaphor of a train journey – like you're sitting in the carriage of a train, here in my office at present, and if upsetting feelings come up, it's just like scenery outside the train. All you have to do is notice and let it go by. Your brain is going to take you wherever it needs to go. You need to know that you may experience intense emotions, both during EMDR sessions and also perhaps between sessions. This can be difficult and tiring emotional work and you may need to take really good care of yourself during the time that you're doing the EMDR with me.