

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Client Handout

What is eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)?

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is a structured, evidence-based therapeutic approach designed to help individuals process distressing memories and experiences. Developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro in the late 1980s, EMDR is recognized as an effective treatment for conditions such as:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - Anxiety and panic disorders
 - Depression
 - Phobias
 - Grief and loss
 - Addictions
 - Chronic pain
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How does EMDR work?

EMDR therapy is based on the adaptive information processing (AIP) model, which explains how the brain processes and stores experiences. Normally, memories are integrated into networks of thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences, helping us learn and adapt. However, highly distressing or traumatic events can overwhelm this system, leaving memories “stuck” in their raw, unprocessed state. These unprocessed memories often retain intense emotions, physical sensations, or negative beliefs (e.g., “I am unsafe”), which can be triggered by similar situations, causing ongoing distress and dysfunctional reactions.

EMDR works by targeting these “stuck” memories and reactivating the brain’s natural processing system. During therapy, specific memories are recalled while engaging in bilateral stimulation, such as guided eye movements, tapping, or auditory tones. This process helps the brain reprocess the memory, reducing its emotional intensity and linking it to adaptive information. For example, a memory associated with fear might be reframed as a past event that no longer poses a threat.

Through this reprocessing, EMDR allows the individual to integrate distressing memories into a healthier perspective. The emotional charge tied to the memory diminishes, and new, positive beliefs or feelings are installed, replacing old, negative patterns. While EMDR doesn’t erase memories, it transforms how they are stored and experienced, reducing triggers and promoting emotional balance and resilience.

What are the phases of EMDR therapy?

EMDR therapy follows an eight-phase protocol:

1. History taking:

Your therapist gathers detailed information about your past experiences, current challenges, and therapy goals. This phase establishes a clear understanding of your distressing memories and how they impact you.

2. Preparation:

You will learn coping skills and relaxation techniques to manage distress. Your therapist will also explain EMDR's process to ensure you feel comfortable and empowered.

3. Assessment:

Together, you and your therapist identify the specific memories or experiences to target. This includes examining related thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations.

4. Desensitization:

During this phase, you recall the targeted memories while engaging in bilateral stimulation (e.g., eye movements or tapping). This helps the brain reprocess the memory, reducing its emotional intensity.

5. Installation:

Your therapist will guide you in reinforcing positive beliefs or feelings to replace negative ones associated with the memory. For example, a belief like "I am powerless" might be replaced with "I am strong and capable."

6. Body scan:

You will focus on physical sensations to identify and release any residual tension or discomfort linked to the memory.

7. Closure:

Each session concludes with techniques to help you stabilize and maintain emotional balance until the next session.

8. Re-evaluation:

The next session begins with phase eight, re-evaluation, where the therapist assesses your current psychological state, checks if treatment effects have persisted, explores any new memories, and collaborates with you to set goals for the session.

What makes EMDR unique?

EMDR doesn't require extensive discussion about your trauma or homework between sessions. It works directly on the brain's natural processing abilities, offering faster relief for many individuals compared to traditional talk therapy.

EMDR's structured approach is adaptable to a wide range of conditions, making it an effective and versatile option for healing trauma and emotional distress.

What to expect during an EMDR session

EMDR therapy sessions are structured to create a safe, supportive environment where you can process distressing memories at your own pace. Here's what typically happens during a session:

Bilateral stimulation

A key component of EMDR therapy is bilateral stimulation, which helps your brain process and reframe distressing memories. This may involve:

- Tracking a moving light or the therapist's hand with your eyes.
- Alternating taps on your hands, knees, or shoulders.
- Listening to alternating tones through headphones.

These methods activate both sides of your brain, supporting its natural ability to process and integrate experiences.

Memory processing

With your therapist's guidance, you'll focus on a specific memory, thought, or feeling while engaging in bilateral stimulation. During this process, you may:

- Recall details of the memory while feeling a gradual decrease in emotional intensity.
- Experience new insights or perspectives that change how you view the memory.
- Notice physical sensations, such as muscle tension, warmth, or relief, as the memory is processed.

These reactions are normal and indicate that your brain is working to resolve and reframe the memory.

After the session

Your brain may continue to process the memory after the session ends. This is a natural part of EMDR therapy and might involve:

- Vivid dreams or flashbacks related to the memory.
- Shifts in emotions, such as feeling lighter, calmer, or more reflective.
- New thoughts or realizations about past experiences.

Your therapist will help you understand these experiences and provide strategies to manage any discomfort.

By engaging in EMDR therapy, you can expect to work collaboratively with your therapist to reduce distress, build resilience, and gain a new perspective on your past experiences.

Are there side effects?

While EMDR is generally well-tolerated, some individuals may experience:

- Temporary increases in distress during or after sessions as challenging memories are addressed.
- Unexpected emotions, sensations, or vivid dreams as your brain processes the experiences.

Your therapist will provide tools to help you manage these effects and ensure the process remains safe and supportive.

How can EMDR help you take back control?

Through EMDR, individuals often feel a sense of empowerment and freedom from the grip of their past experiences. Working with a trained therapist, you can:

- Reclaim control over your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
 - Build healthier beliefs and coping strategies.
 - Move forward with greater confidence and peace of mind.
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Is EMDR right for you?

EMDR therapy is highly effective for individuals who:

- Struggle with unresolved trauma or distressing memories.
- Feel "stuck" or unable to move forward after difficult experiences.
- Experience symptoms like anxiety, depression, flashbacks, or emotional numbness.

However, EMDR may not be suitable for everyone, particularly those with severe dissociation, untreated psychosis, or other complex conditions. Your therapist will conduct a thorough assessment to determine if EMDR is the best approach for your needs.

Notes