

Understanding EMDR Therapy

What happens during trauma...

Our brain has an innate capacity to heal, just like the body does. However, when we experience a traumatic or highly stressful event, the memory of this event may not be processed in the same way that an ordinary memory is processed and may get 'stuck'.

When we are under threat, our amygdala - the 'smoke alarm' in our brain - gets set off, and we experience an unconscious fight, flight or freeze survival response. The part of the brain that usually puts a 'time and date stamp' on a memory (called the hippocampus) can get suppressed. As a result, the memory may get 'frozen in time' and stuck in our nervous system. We then may feel as though we are reliving the event over and over and experiencing the thoughts and feelings that we had at the time of the trauma.

This can present as symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts. It is as if our body is still in fight, flight or freeze mode and the 'smoke alarm' in our brain (amygdala) keeps going off, even when the trauma is long over and there's no danger present, leading us to feel anxious or unsafe. Our thinking can also be shaped by traumatic or stressful life experiences. We may form negative beliefs about ourselves (eg. "I'm not good enough"), other people (eg. "I can't trust anyone") or the world around us (eg. "I am not safe").

How EMDR Therapy can help...

EMDR is a treatment model that utilises bilateral stimulation – such as eye movements - to activate the brain in a way that processes and resolves 'stuck' traumatic memories. In a sense, EMDR 'kick-starts' the brain's natural healing process and gets it going again.

In EMDR Therapy, you and your therapist will work together to identify:

- The current issues or symptoms in your life that you would like to address, and which issue would be a good starting point to focus on
- Which traumatic or stressful events in your life have led to the development of your primary issue or symptom. These are the memories that will be 'targeted'
- The memory or issue that would be the best place to start.

Once you and the therapist feel confident that you are ready to process this 'target', you will be asked a series of questions that helps you to identify:

- The content of the distressing memory (ie. an image of the worst moment)
- The negative belief(s) that you have about yourself in relation to the event and what you would rather believe instead

- The emotions/sensations that you feel when you connect with the event

Your therapist will then guide you to track their fingers left to right (or another form of bilateral stimulation such as alternate sounds or taps), while observing the memory and any beliefs, emotions or sensations that emerge, just allowing whatever happens to happen. This continues in repeated sets, with the therapist regularly checking in with you in between each set of eye movements, to see what is coming up for you.

How does it work?

The eye movements (or other form of bilateral stimulation) activate the brain's natural healing mechanism, similar to what occurs during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, when the eyes flicker left and right while you are dreaming. When you recall the memory, it moves from your long-term memory to your short-term memory, otherwise known as working memory. Keeping the memory in your mind while tracking the therapist's fingers at the same time means that your working memory has to process a lot of information at the same time, therefore 'overloading' your working memory.

As a result of all of this, three things usually happen:

- The memory becomes more distant
- Emotional distress diminishes
- New, more helpful beliefs emerge

Pathways start connecting between the emotional part of the brain and the part of the brain that thinks logically. You are likely to start thinking differently about the memory, which leads to it having a much less negative impact on you. As you process a series of key memories or issues in EMDR Therapy over time, your trauma symptoms are likely to reduce, more positive ways of thinking will likely develop, and your responses and behaviour will likely start to change. These changes are profound and lasting, because you are addressing core issues on a deep level, rather than just managing your symptoms.

EMDR is an 8-phase model of treatment that can take different lengths of time, depending on your particular circumstances. Some people require more preparation than others. Some memories resolve in a single session, sometimes it takes a few sessions. There is no right or wrong! You will be awake and in control at all times during an EMDR session and you can say 'stop' if you are feeling overwhelmed and need to pause the process. EMDR Therapy is a highly effective method of treatment that is endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and delivered by many trauma therapists across the world.

All of our therapists at Mindful Living are trained and experienced in EMDR Therapy.

Call us on 1300 844 255 or email us at info@mindfulliving.com.au if you would like to find out more about how EMDR might be able to assist you or someone in your life.