



EMDR; a way to cut the ties that bind emotion, pain and negative behaviors

By Dr. Delia Roberts

The world today is a complicated place. We've gotten through the pandemic, only to find ourselves faced with unprecedented cultural, financial and environmental pressures. And the cost is evident, with depression, anxiety, substance use disorders and other mental health issues rising exponentially. One in three Canadians will experience a mental illness that generates a level of distress high enough to challenge their ability to work, function well and maintain relationships. If you haven't experienced this directly, you most certainly know someone who has.

Why most people don't get help

While awareness of the importance of cultivating good mental health has increased, the stigma against it lingers on – especially in cultures like forestry, which remain largely male dominated and where strength and independence are highly valued. Even just identifying anxiety and depression can be difficult because they can present differently from the stereotypical symptoms. Depression is most often associated with feelings like overwhelming sadness, hopelessness, fatigue, and withdrawal, while anxiety symptoms most often manifest as excessive worrying, feelings of dread, panic and insomnia. Men who are struggling with anxiety/depression may instead demonstrate aggression, anger and angry outbursts, violence, and/or increased substance use. Additionally, due to socialization men can be hindered in identifying thoughts and feelings other than those that are more socially acceptable, like anger.

And even when people realize that a problem exists it's still hard to get help. Although most communities and worksites now have some type of support system in place, many of these resources are not covered by health insurance and require a long-term commitment. The expense of years of treatment is beyond the means of many. And for those who work on the block, time and access remain problematic. There may not even be cell coverage let alone the possibility of a face-to-face visit.

A new(ish) and effective treatment

Enter EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) - a relatively new treatment available that is surprisingly effective, frequently lowering ratings of emotional distress significantly after only a few sessions.

First introduced in 1987, EMDR rapidly gained credibility as an extremely effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arising from big 'T' trauma like a worksite fatality, war experience or natural disaster.

Continued on page 24...



Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing

However, in many cases, the stressful experiences that haunt us are more diffuse and may be ongoing. As our understanding of the effects of trauma expanded, so did the realization EMDR could be effective in the treatment of other types of mental illness. In 2013 EMDR was recognized by the World Health Organization as having application in the treatment of different types of trauma and a broad field of mental disorders beyond PTSD including depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even chronic pain.

What happens in an EMDR treatment session?

In EMDR the individual first makes a list of events and situations that they find painful and difficult. This may include specific memories of experiences or more general descriptions of difficult situations. Unlike many other types of therapy, **there is no requirement to describe these experiences in detail**, they can simply be identified in general terms (for example, something bad happened at work). The practitioner uses this information to assist in identifying one or two key images and beliefs associated with the chosen memory, which the patient thinks about while focusing on an object that the practitioner moves from side to side. The patient then continues to follow the object with their eyes while letting their mind wander, open to whatever thoughts arise. After a few minutes, the eye movement is stopped and the patient takes a few moments to take stock of any emotions or physical perceptions, which they then discuss briefly with the practitioner. Trends are identified, which then become the focus for the initial portion of the next eye movement period. During the last focusing of the session, the patient replaces the negative memory with a positive belief. In this way the old memories, feelings and beliefs are processed in a safe environment in such a way as they shifted into a more normal memory pattern. This in turn allows the emotions and negative

beliefs that have been long associated with the memory to be disconnected and defused.

Restructuring memories without dissecting them

Although research into how EMDR works is still ongoing, there are a number of well-established theories that may explain why it is so effective. In general, it's thought that when very stressful or inappropriate events take place, the memory of these events is not processed in the same way as other memories – especially when there are feelings of helplessness associated with the stressful event (as there are for a child or person in a position without power to change the situation). These memories become supercharged, perhaps as a protective mechanism, in an attempt to avoid further harm. However, in many cases the painful memories cross over and become associated with other non-threatening situations. And because the emotions experienced are out of proportion and often not relevant to the present situation, they can lead to further stress and other negative coping behaviors.

Modalities like Cognitive Based Therapy (CBT) are commonly used to address depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges. They involve examining the memories and deliberately working to disassociate them from emotion and negative beliefs. These treatments can help, but the need to revisit the traumatic experiences in detail can be very painful, and since the underlying unprocessed memories remain it requires constant work to build new habits. In EMDR, the rapid eye movement is thought to move the memory into regular long-term storage, perhaps by 'rewiring' the neural pathways associated with the memory, and dissociating it from the strong emotions. There is even evidence of structural changes within the brain following EMDR treatment suggesting that physical changes do take place.

And this is in fact the way that patients describe how EMDR has changed their reaction to triggering situations; the memories or hurt might remain, but the attachment to the overwhelming feelings and emotions has been disconnected. The energy that was required to deal with the negative memory and all its associated feelings and emotions becomes available for other pursuits including work, family and fun.

Take the power out of pain

According to the Canadian Psychological Association, 76% of Canadians experience some kind of trauma within their lifespan and approximately 10% will develop long lasting emotional pain from the trauma. EMDR has been shown to be an effective treatment for repossessing memories that drive negative beliefs and behaviors. Furthermore, most people feel significant relief within only a few sessions. Rather than trying to learn behaviors to control the emotions, thoughts and responses resulting from traumatic experiences, EMDR therapy allows the memory to be re-filed in a way that diffuses the emotional connection, breaking the cycle of distress. So many of us are haunted by past events that suck up our energy and get in the way of fully enjoying our relationships, experiences and dreams. EMDR may be the tool that allows you to break free and be the best that you are.

For more information

<https://emdrcanada.org/>

<https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>

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