

What is EMDR Therapy?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is an extensively researched, effective psychotherapy method proven to help people recover from trauma and other distressing life experiences, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, and panic disorders.

The following organizations recognize EMDR therapy as an effective treatment for trauma processing:

- American Psychiatric Association
- American Psychological Association
- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- U.K. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense
- The Cochran Database of Systematic Reviews
- The World Health Organization

Trauma Signs and Symptoms in Children and Youth

- Eating or sleep disturbances
- Feeling helpless
- Constricted play or lack of curiosity
- Social isolation
- Difficulty paying attention
- Changes in school behaviors
- Toileting issues
- Irritability
- Easily startled
- Shame and guilt
- Low self-esteem
- Reenactment of traumatic event
- Aggressive behavior
- Sexualized behavior
- Substance use/abuse
- Disturbance of body image

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EMDR THERAPY
for Children and Adolescents



EMDR Therapy for Children and Youth

Experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event can make everyday life a lot harder for a child or teen. Scary events like natural disasters, violence, abuse, school shootings, and accidents can leave lasting distress. Even more common upsetting events such as school problems, bullying, cyberbullying, death, divorce, foster care, and family problems can also make life seem hard to manage. EMDR therapy is a way to work through troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to these events. It helps build healthy coping skills and increases a child's sense of self-worth. EMDR also strengthens feelings of success and calmness, while reducing negative beliefs and emotions from distressing situations.

EMDR therapy can be done in-person or via virtual platforms and must be done with a properly trained and licensed mental health clinician.

How is EMDR Different From Other Therapies?

EMDR therapy does not require talking in detail about the distressing issue, or homework between sessions. EMDR supports the brain to resume its natural healing process, so the child does not feel controlled by disturbing memories. Part of the therapy includes alternating eye movements, sounds, or taps. For children, it is possible to use other forms of movements that are playful such as: patty-cakes, drumming, magic wands, ball games, marching, stomping, and dancing. EMDR can be integrated with other modalities such as art therapy, play therapy, sandtray and other creative interventions. For many clients, EMDR therapy can be completed in fewer sessions than other psychotherapies.

Experiencing EMDR Therapy

First, there is a discussion about the child's history, development of a treatment plan, and then an agreement that EMDR reprocessing is a good fit. The therapist prepares the child for trauma processing by strengthening the child's sense of safety and building skills to cope with feelings. The therapist guides the child to focus on the distressing event for short periods of time. Attention is given to a negative image, belief, body sensation, and feeling related to this event. The therapist begins sets of side-to-side eye movements, sounds, or taps. The child is guided to notice what comes after each set. They may experience new insights, changes in images, feelings, body sensations, or beliefs regarding the event. The child has full control to stop the therapist at any point, if needed. The sets of eye movements, sounds, or taps are repeated until the event becomes less disturbing. Later, the child is guided to focus on a positive belief that would indicate the event was resolved such as: "It is over. I am safe now." Then, the child will process any disturbance still left in the body. The therapist closes the session and supports the child to feel grounded and utilize their coping skills. At the beginning of the next session, the client and therapist review the work done and continue reprocessing events as needed. EMDR therapy can be done with the support of a parent or the child's guardian and it can help to increase attachment and repair relationships.



How Does EMDR Therapy Help With The Healing Process?

Our brains have a natural way to recover from traumatic memories and events. This process involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm signal for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists with learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the prefrontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion). While many times traumatic experiences can be managed and resolved spontaneously, others may not be processed without help.

Stress responses are our natural fight, flight, or freeze instincts. When distress from a disturbing event remains, the upsetting images, thoughts, and emotions may create feelings of overwhelm, of being back in that moment, or of being "frozen in time." EMDR therapy helps the brain process these memories and allows normal healing to resume. The experience is still remembered, but the fight, flight, or freeze response from the original event is resolved.

EMDR begins by strengthening a child's sense of safety and building skills to cope with feelings like fear, anger, and sadness related to a distressing event.