

EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING (EMDR)

OVERVIEW

EMDR is a simple and straightforward tool to enhance the therapy process. It was discovered by a psychologist, Francine Shapiro in 1987 and has been very well researched since then. She found that encouraging rapid eye movements back and forth or other bilateral stimulation (BLS) can reprocess trauma that is stuck in our brains. There is no denying that trauma does get stuck and can haunt or hurt us for a lifetime. Talk therapy is intended to neutralize this “emotional toxic waste” and EMDR facilitates that reprocessing! It actually transforms that which poisons into that which empowers.

BLS helps people to reprocess irrational, but believable negative self-statements related to the trauma and convert them to more accurate beliefs. The latter contribute to personal growth, better coping and healthier responses in a variety of sensitive or stressful situations. EMDR works with single incident PTSD (i.e. car accident, mugging, police shooting, partner betrayal, etc). It has also been found to be very helpful as part of therapy for anxiety problems, depression, relationship issues, etc.

One aspect is the creation of a safe space through visual imaging. Everyone can benefit from this easily accessible and free retreat into peace, quiet and calm.

Feel free to read my complete introduction to EMDR that follows. It has many relevant personal experiences that I encountered in my training.

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AN INTRODUCTION

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A CHANGE OF HEART AND MIND

It is always interesting to realize after the fact how wrong we can be in our opinions and judgments. We all carry biases around with us that filter how we see ourselves and our world. Of interest is that this is precisely what EMDR seeks to modify and change. For many years I have been aware of EMDR and chalked it off to something that made no sense. I was admittedly, wrong.

In the last year I was trying to help several people deal with anxiety related problems. I was frustrated that I was not able to help them to the level I would have liked. I referred them to my colleague, Joyce Gilbert, M.S., who had been trained many years ago in EMDR by the psychologist who discovered, researched, taught and promoted the process, Francine Shapiro, Ph.D.

I was impressed, perhaps amazed, to see how rapidly Joyce could help these people overcome their fears and anxieties. In one particular instance, a woman who lived for many years with a dread fear of driving on highways, overpasses and any long distances, was able to overcome that in about eight visits, could now drive comfortably anywhere, including across I-75 to the West Coast of Florida. Prior to that just getting to and from work which was a twenty minute drive required a great deal of strategic planning, interweaving short periods on highways with longer periods on the streets.

This impressed me enough so that I signed up for an intensive training program for EMDR. I have completed the first phase, am currently under supervision by an expert in Philadelphia, and plan to take the second and concluding phase of training in February, 2008. My studies and personal experiences during training have so impressed me that I plan to include EMDR in many of the therapies dealing with anxiety, trauma and other relevant problem

areas. We have also created a Ft. Lauderdale network of experienced EMDR providers.

A STITCH IN TIME...

A couple of years ago, I cut my finger very badly on a piece of jagged glass. The gash was deep and I knew immediately I would require stitches. Interestingly enough, this was the first time in my life that I was having stitches. As I lay on the ER table getting my finger sewn up, I could not help but think how lovely it would be if we had an equivalent laser- like beam of assistance for the mind. Long ago I discovered that we all have deep wounds within our minds that directly cause our unhappiness and our pain filled thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Anxiety, depression and all our mindly woes flow from these emotional wounds. Recently I have summarized those ideas in a series of articles that you can read on www.williampenzerphd.com called, " A Hole In Your Self"... Parts I, II and III.

Up until now, I have used words to serve as stitches to try to close those holes in ways that allowed for more comfortable adult based living. That words are powerful and can help heal our mindly wounds is undeniable. That we have learned how to use words effectively and more efficiently than ever in the last twenty years is equally undeniable. However, it is a slow process, although not as slow as my five year, three time a week Psychoanalysis in the early 70's. Then, I was experiencing a serious bout of panic, anxiety and agoraphobia long before those words were part of our lexicon. Though it ultimately helped me it took much too long. EMDR adds a very powerful tool to our therapy. Though it still takes a while, it can move along more rapidly with a more powerful resolution.

BILATERAL STIMULATION (BLS)

BLS is one of the core elements of EMDR. For reasons that are not completely understood, it appears that stimulation that comes to both eyes or ears allows for a reprocessing and neutralizing of trauma and what I call emotional wounds. This helps to turn emotional agitators into more neutral or positive thoughts and feelings. It appears to activate a part of our brain that works like white out, if I want to date myself, or the delete key on a computer, if I want to stay more up to date. Just as I am fascinated with the ease of correcting a manuscript or letter on a word processing system today, as compared to the difficulty of doing that during my college and graduate school days, I am equally intrigued by the way BLS can do the very same thing for our minds.

Dr. Shapiro accidentally discovered that when she was thinking about a troublesome thought which generated negative feelings and her eyes spontaneously went back and forth several times, it changed how she felt and what she thought. Upon discovering this she experimented with students, colleagues, friends and relatives and anyone else who would allow her to stimulate rapid eye movements by moving her hand back and forth. Intriguingly she found similar results. Years of research with trauma, anxiety and other problems consistently validate the effectiveness of this BLS experience. In fact, they have generalized it now to the point where she would rename it reprocessing therapy because it is not limited solely to eye movements. Sounds that stimulate people bilaterally as well as taps to both sides of the body can accomplish the same thing. There is something about BLS that accelerates emotional processing and healthy reprocessing.

I have a simple minded explanation which has some face validity. I have come to the conclusion that a healthy person is a bilaterally stimulated organism. Look at a person and what do you see? We have two arms and two legs and a pretty symmetrical body all around. We receive all of our visual and auditory experiences bilaterally. Even our olfactory experiences come through two nostrils. It is evident that all of our life experiences come at us in some bilateral way. Even our mouths, which you might argue are unilateral, are shaped by two lips and an upper and lower set of teeth. In addition, our brains are divided into a right and left hemispheres. There is an awful lot of bilaterality to our being, which perhaps explains why this simple technique can be such a powerful one. It is the way we all received information from the day we were born.

Beyond the symmetry of our physiology and neurology is an explanation based in the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) of sleep and dreams. We know that people in laboratories deprived of REM sleep have synthetic emotional breakdowns. These disappear completely when REM sleep is allowed. This reinforces the idea that rapid eye movements and BLS have a powerful influence on healthy mental processing and the discharging of trauma which get stuck in our brains.

EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

No one comes through life without some kind of emotional trauma. Many of us argue that birth itself is our first traumatic upheaval, going from the peace and tranquility of the womb to what William James called the “ booming, buzzing, confusion...”. Even if we were raised in the healthiest of families, as I propose in my “Hole In The Self” articles, there is much trauma in the natural process of going from a helpless, dependent infant to an adult. As we know, the likelihood of being raised in a healthy family is extremely low. The wonderful cartoon of the

functional family support group showing one person in the audience sums it up well.

Add to that the various traumas, large and small, of life. Being in a car accident or other life threatening situation, being rejected in a social situation or not being as good as others in an athletic situation, or having the crap beat out of you by a parent or sibling, discovering your partner's infidelity, etc., etc. , etc. , all qualify as traumatic events. All research shows that the single incident post-traumatic stress problem is the most amenable to EMDR work. While more complicated and multiple traumatic experiences may take longer, they are amenable to resolution and reprocessing through this powerful tool as well.

It is believed by many that for whatever complex of reasons trauma can get blocked and frozen in our brains and our minds. It's like a meal that doesn't get digested easily and keeps repeating on us. Long ago, during my anxiety and phobia period, I suggested that we all had a "cesspool" in the back of our heads that stored all of our negative emotional experiences and associated feelings. I also posited a "dam" that stood in front of the cesspool, with the idea that if the dam was strong it could contain the cess and enable us to function comfortably. I came to understand the problems I was going through and those of the people I was trying to help as a function of the balance of power between the cesspool and the dam. Leakage through the dam caused anxiety, panic, depression, obsessive ruminations, eating disorders, etc. I believe that model still works well to explain our mental misery. I have come to believe that BLS therapy helps by finally desensitizing that which sits in our cesspool, so that it can no longer irritate and agitate our sensitive emotional nerve endings. When the cess is desensitized, it is no longer able to inflict its hurtful influence. We are finally freed from these burdens.

BRAIN FREEZE

It is clear to me that as Dr. Shapiro and others discovered, trauma of all kinds gets frozen into our brains. Take a simple example:

I am walking in the park and I see two people having a catch. My immediate and spontaneous association and memory is to two negative events. The first is to playing stickball in the Bronx, N.Y. when I was about 14. I am running forward to catch a ball and a taller, older boy is running backward. We collide and his chin breaks my scalp. That bloody traumatizing image comes popping out all these years later as I observe the two people throwing a ball.

That was immediately followed by an image of my father being upset with me when we had ball catch, because my throws were off and he had to chase after them.

Watching the people immediately brought up two awful memories from 50+ years ago. Oddly enough, there are probably 100's of positive ball playing images from my youth, but for the most part only the negative seem to survive. The same is true for other areas such as traveling. Though I have had 100's of happy trips, I can revive traumas and near tragedies in a nanosecond.

Think about it and I believe you will agree that traumatic, negative, less than comfortable experiences can get stuck inside, leaving lingering toxic emotional waste that can pollute our personal environment and affect our reactions and behavior. While some are not so important (i.e. ball catching) , others can be quite significant and intrusive (i.e. a negative flying, elevator, or driving experience) that limit your comfort and increase your anxiety, phobia and panic potentials.

The beauty of words in conjunction with BLS is that it can target these frozen trauma spots and neutralize their influence. While the memory remains, its self-limiting message (i.e., "playing/travel is dangerous") is reprocessed to a more enhancing one (i.e. it is ok to play, travel is fun, I am ok, etc). Little by little traumatic memories and associated images can be identified – just as we do in therapy – targeted and reprocessed, neutralized and nullified via BLS. This intensifies and speeds up the power of words alone.

BELIEFS: NEGATIVE, NEUTRAL AND POSITIVE

BLS also helps by reprocessing and reprogramming irrational negative beliefs and images about our self that we carry with us. Examples of these negative beliefs are, " I am bad, worthless, not good enough, powerless, unimportant..." Others include, "I cannot trust anyone, I am not in control, I am weak, I am a failure, I have to be perfect. " There is probably no one alive who doesn't carry some of these negative self- beliefs around. When they are strong and extreme, our dam collapses easily and our functioning is impaired and limited. The same is true when new traumas come at us. Our dams drop and cess leaks through. This also occurs when we are tired, overwhelmed, pmsing, sick, etc.

Examples of positive beliefs are what I have been writing about all of my career and include: "I deserve love, I am worthy, I am OK the way I am, I am now in control, I am strong, I can choose whom to trust, I am safe, I am self-sufficient, etc." In the process of therapy, negative images and cognitions are identified. Words help to neutralize their impact. BLS speeds up this conversion to more positive images and beliefs. In past articles I have talked about the power of positive self- accounting and have come to see and experience EMDR as a process through which that occurs in a more efficient way. It's "quickbooks" for the mind. What's more, the therapy encourages less talking and more allowing

the process to keep moving along by the client. Healing is based in the person, where it belongs with the therapist as the facilitator. Dr. Shapiro states, “the clinician’s job is to facilitate the client’s self-healing process.”

ANCIENT HISTORY

It is almost humorous to compare my personal therapy experience thirty five years ago with EMDR. There, in classic Freudian fashion, I was encouraged to lie on a couch, free associate and come back three times a week. I talked almost the entire session with my analyst saying little to nothing other than writing copious notes for reasons I have never fully understood, even though I myself had training in classical psychoanalysis. The process of psychoanalysis is both authoritarian and rigid. The analyst is like a parent, while the person involved is the patient and feels very much the inadequate child. Adding insult to injury is that there is little feedback and when time is up, it is up, even mid-sentence.

Though Freud contributed significantly to our knowledge and understanding of the depths and complexity of the human mind, the analytic process that he created was better suited to the times in which he lived in Eastern Europe. They are about as ill fitting in today’s world as the clothes I wore in the 50’s and 60’s. Analysis puts the emphasis on the wisdom of the analyst, whereas EMDR puts the wisdom to resolve problems by the person.

I venture to guess that if the tools of cognitive behavioral therapy, medications and EMDR existed in 1973, my therapy, given that I had a very severe case, would have lasted no more than five months of once weekly visits instead of five years of three times a week visits. Just as modern medicine has advanced to unparalleled levels, so has modern psychology and psychotherapy. In this sense, EMDR can be likened to the angioplasty I had in 2001 that cleared out my clogged coronary artery which would have saved my fathers and father-in-laws life in the early 60’s, had it been invented. EMDR can clear out clogged emotional arteries and allow you to breathe in a much more comfortable way. Dr. Shapiro says “when this disturbing material is unlocked and allowed to process, the reservoir of negative emotions is drained along with it.” That is cess pool talk if I ever heard it!

MY PERSONAL EMDR EXPERIENCE

In my own experience during the training, I chose to target my exaggerated focus on achieving and being productive. This keeps me from taking better care of me in a more relaxing way. Note that as I dictate this draft, I

am sitting in my backyard on a beautiful Sunday afternoon enjoying the breeze, the sun and a really lovely blue sky with large puffy white clouds listening to the delightful tingling of a mobile and a beautiful view of foliage and water converging on a lovely green carpet of grass.

As we got to what is called a touchstone memory – the earliest time I could remember something associated with my presenting problem – I was able to conjure up an image of my mother walking me to school in the third grade. That image was a troubling one for several reasons. It was a combination of feeling different than the other children who, at my age, were allowed to walk to school by themselves in the relative safe environment of the Bronx in the 50's. In addition, Mom would use that time to drill me on spelling words or multiplication tables or something else. Is it any wonder that as a result of that and probably thousands of other analogous experiences, I developed a need to be productive and use my time wisely?

As we proceeded through the reprocessing experience, the image stayed the same for a while, but feelings of anger began to surface. They were of the frustrating type that I recall experiencing in psychoanalysis, when my shrink and I would probe through all of the dirty, over-protective diapers of my youth. However, as we continued the reprocessing/desensitization and the “going with that” (whatever came up from BLS to BLS) I became more relaxed. The anger dissipated completely, my ratings went from very disturbed to less disturbed to not disturbed and amazingly enough my mother disappeared from the picture. That was a WOW for me in terms of seeing the potential payoff of this reprocessing experience. In that shift, my positive belief changed to, “ I am self-sufficient” and that feeling has continued to linger within me long after this brief training experience. In fact, the EMDR Institute and Tranquility Relaxation Center were created after that EMDR experience. I believe I had the confidence to go forward based on a greater sense of self-sufficiency and comfort in trusting my own judgment.

YOUR OWN PERSONAL, PRIVATE AND FREE SAFE SPACE

As part of the EMDR process you will establish a safe space to which you can retreat whenever you chose. It is a simple, straight-forward procedure which is enhanced by BLS. It creates a powerful visual image of a relaxing and peaceful scene that you can use to just get away from the stress of the moment (i.e., I use it when I have to go to the dentist) or just as a quick battery charge whenever you have a few minutes to vicariously enjoy a place you enjoy. It is analogous to a virtual tour in today's world and rather delightful. It also helps build your relaxation muscle to offset stress and anxiety.

In my case, I picked my favorite beach in Jupiter, Florida, named it Jupiter and can just say the word Jupiter and close my eyes and picture myself sitting on the beach with all of the relaxing and energizing ambiance. It is a pleasant,

peaceful place to go literally when I can and virtually when I cannot. Other relaxing resources can be installed via EMDR as well to enhance your sense of comfort, safety and peacefulness. I would like all who visit me to have their “safe space” as well, even if you don’t do anything more with EMDR.

In this sense, the only risk of EMDR is that it might not be as helpful as we would like. Obviously, as with all aspects of our mind people react differently. It is not a cure all, panacea or easy fix for the complex problems that bring you to our office. Its power lies in its efficiency and its ability to activate therapy and speed up the process. Most of the time, however, EMDR is a helpful adjunct to our work.

IN CONCLUSION

Important is that despite the primitive and ignorant times during which I received treatment, my anxieties and panic did get resolved and I have not suffered from them, despite all kinds of personal and family traumas, in over 25 years. There is no denying the power of words in the healing process. It has amazed and impressed me for all the years of my career. However, I believe I have found a technique that when combined with helpful words can more effectively “stitch up” and more efficiently help heal the wounds that you have suffered and the trauma that you have experienced. It is lovely to think that your holes won’t be bleeding onto your life as long as my cesspool did on mine.

I welcome your questions and offer this process to anyone who would like to experience it. Know that we have a network of EMDR providers that includes: Joyce Gilbert, M.S. in Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale, Randy Levine, Ph.D, Marcia Seeberg, M.S. and myself in Plantation. I hope everyone who visits will, at the very least create a safe place. In today’s turbulent and hustle bustle times we can all definitely benefit from that.

Know as well that EMDR is only one component of our Tranquility Relaxation Center. You can learn more about our tranquil offerings on our website.

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