

EMDR

Moving your eyes until it's gone

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Children

You've come here because something bad happened to you that is upsetting you. It could be an accident or a fire, or maybe you were bullied or even physically abused, or had some other horrible thing happen to you. It could be something that happened once, but also something that went on for months or even years. A bad experience like that can make you feel different inside, and the stuff that happened can just keep playing over and over again in your head like a film. It can make you not feel like doing anything, but it can also make you lose sleep or lose your temper quickly or distract you and mess up your concentration.

EMDR information

Moving your eyes until it's gone

Many children find it strange that they suddenly react so differently. But that's all because of that experience. And the awful feelings and horrible thoughts that go with it. Luckily, something can be done to help you quickly. It's called EMDR.

Over quickly

EMDR is a therapy especially for children like you. To get EMDR therapy, you go to see what we call a therapist. A therapist is a man or lady who is there to help you feel better about yourself again. We know that EMDR works really well. Sometimes it works faster than other times. If your bad experience happened just once, you will be finished with it before other boys or girls who had bad experiences for a long time. That's understandable. But even then, EMDR can really help you. A lot of children have said afterwards that they thought it was fun to do.

Tim, 11 years old:

"I feel much better now. I'm sleeping properly. I'm happy, and I want to do things again. I liked doing the eye movement stuff. It wasn't boring at all. It was fun."

What choice is there?

What happens during the therapy? Well, first the therapist will ask you to tell the story of what happened and to get the picture of the story that's upsetting you the most right now. The therapist may also ask you to draw a picture of it. The two of you will work out a way for you not to feel bad anymore when you think about what happened back then. The way it works is this: you concentrate on the 'picture in your head' (or the drawing) and on what you're thinking and feeling about it. At the same time, you'll be doing something completely different. The therapist will choose one of these things to do:

- following the fingers of the therapist with your eyes, as they move them from side to side in front of your face, *or*
- listening to sounds on the headphones, *or*
- tapping on the hands of the therapist with your hands (or he/she can tap on yours)

Sophie, 9 years old:

“The first time, I thought: ‘is this going to help me’?

But the second time I knew for sure, because it gave me a nice, safe feeling. I’m not afraid to do things like before, and I’m really happy now.”

Checking how you are doing

Once in a while, the therapist will ask: "What do you feel now?" or "What are you thinking?" Sometimes, pictures of what happened will pop up in your head. Or you suddenly think of something, like for instance that all was your fault. You can also feel sad, scared, or angry. Or you start to notice all kinds of changes in your body, like a tickle in your throat, or stomach aches, which you then tell the therapist about. And when it doesn't affect you anything anymore, you just say so.

The therapy will go on until you can look at the 'picture in your head' or the drawing without it upsetting you. This happens until it doesn't affect you anymore. And that's what we want. The problems you came here for in the first place will then become smaller or go away completely.

Jamie, 5 years old:

"Everything just seems to fly out when you're drumming. It's like 'zap' – it just flies out of your head, in tiny little pieces. And once it's gone, it never comes back again."

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Drawings: Natasha, 10 years old

What are you feeling?

I'm scared

How about now?

It's gone now

I feel happy

E M D R

Traumatic memories become ordinary ones

Parents/guardians

You have asked for help because your child is suffering from emotional, physical or behavioural problems. These problems seem to be related to either one or a number of traumatic experiences, such as an accident, a fire, physical abuse, bullying, or some other damaging experience.

Scientists believe memories of these upsetting event(s) aren't processed properly in the brain.

Luckily, this can be helped, thanks to an effective therapy called EMDR (Eye Movement

Desensitization and Reprocessing). Once these memories are processed properly, your child's problems will be reduced or even disappear completely.

EMDR information

Traumatic memories become ordinary ones

The good thing about EMDR is that it works so quickly.

A child that has had a single bad experience is likely to need less therapy sessions than a child that has been exposed to long-term, systematic threats or interference. In those cases, EMDR is usually part of a more extensive therapy.

Reprocessing

The key to this probably relates to the way in which traumatic memories are registered. The brain registers traumatic experiences in a different way to normal experiences. With normal experiences, the information flows from the senses to the brain, where it is registered and naturally processed into a memory, which is basically a combination of facts, impressions, and interpretations. In the case of experiences, involving intense fear, helplessness or life-threatening situations, the body puts itself in a state of alert. Consequently, the original disturbing images, thoughts, sounds, and feelings are registered in a raw or unprocessed form. Stimuli, such as images, smells, and sounds that trigger off reminders of that upsetting experience, can continue to re-activate these unprocessed memories. This makes the child respond with the same emotions as he/she did originally, causing him/her to be just as upset again and again. EMDR assists the brain in completing the normal processing of information, in order to enable traumatic memories to become ordinary ones.

The sooner the better

Long-term traumatic experiences can interfere with the development of certain functions in the brain, which can result in a child falling behind in certain areas, as well as influencing the development of the child's personality. The effect of a single bad experience is less influential, but if the problems continue for a long period of time, it can also result in a developmental slowdown. EMDR removes mental blocks, enabling the restart of a healthy development, after which you may see a great improvement in how your child behaves and feels. This probably also has a positive effect on your family life after possible disruption caused by the problems of your child.

No risks involved

The first publication on EMDR appeared in the United States in 1989. In the years that followed, this method of treatment has been enhanced and scientifically studied. On the basis of this research EMDR is now considered to be an effective psychotherapy for adults, teenagers and children who are affected by memories of upsetting events. The only therapists qualified to apply this therapy are those who have received special EMDR training. There are no risks attached to this therapy if applied correctly. At worst there is no improvement, but that will soon become apparent. In that case, it is likely that the problems of your child and the event are not linked after all, or there are too many stress factors involved in the current situation which continue to affect the problems.

What happens during the treatment?

The therapist will ask your child to talk about the incident, and then freeze-frame the image that they find the most harrowing right now. Whilst the child is concentrating on this image and what he or she is thinking and feeling, they are asked to do something else, which could be:

- following the fingers of the therapist with the eyes, as they move them from side to side in front of their face, *or*
- listening to sounds on the headphones, *or*
- tapping on the hands of the therapist with their hands (or the therapist can tap on theirs).

The therapist will ask the child at regular intervals things like: "What are you feeling?" or "What is there now?" This could include images, thoughts or emotions, but may also include physical sensations such as tension or pain. Your child will be able to face the image of those particular incidents with increasing ease. The therapy will continue until your child stops getting upset whenever he/she is reminded of what happened.

There's no doubt *that* EMDR really works. It's not yet known exactly *how* though. It's presumed that the natural information processing mechanism is stimulated by the combination of two factors: concentrating on the upsetting memory and providing a distracting stimulus (eye movements, sound, or touch), which alternately activates the right and left-hand side of the brain.

Intermittent effects

What may happen during the therapy period is that your child is somewhat more focused on the upsetting experience(s) or instances related to them. This is a result of the process of information reprocessing that has been initiated. This process may not stop as soon as your son or daughter leaves the session. Additional unsettling feelings or fear may occur, but this usually stops within three days of a therapy session.

Your role beforehand...

You could explain to your child why he/she needs to come here. You could also look through this information leaflet together. That way, you may already be able to answer a few of the questions your child may have, and collect some that you would like the answers to.

Before the therapy begins, the therapist will need some information from you in order to provide an accurate diagnosis, including information about the seriousness, duration, and development of the problems. What is important is how your child has been developing and is currently, how he/she is behaving, and in what circumstances he/she is growing up.

... and during the therapy

You will also have an important part to play during the therapy sessions: namely that of an observer. Observation is necessary to determine the effects of the therapy, especially where young children are concerned. They have neither developed their vocabulary sufficiently, nor are they able to create enough distance from their experience to put changes in their behaviour and experiences into words.

The other ways in which you will be involved in the therapy are dependant on both the age and wishes of your child.

- **Toddlers and infants (age 1-5)**

The younger your child is, the more important it is for you to be there, so that your child feels safe. The therapist will involve you intensively during the treatment, and will make grateful use of your knowledge of your child.

- **Children (age 6-12)**

Children in this age group are usually able to attend the therapy sessions independently, as they may feel inhibited to be open and enter into detail with a parent or guardian present. The reason is that a child in this age range is able to empathise with the emotions of others, and won't want to upset his /her parent or guardian. Your role here will be primarily to offer support to your child, and be an observer at home.

- **Teenagers (age 12-18)**

You will most likely not be present at the sessions. You can best help your child by letting them know you are there if needed. Monitor your child, and try to let them handle it in their own way. Try not to persist in asking them to tell you about the sessions or the effects of the therapy, but do listen attentively when your child starts to talk. Also learn to accept it when your child doesn't talk, as he/she is going through his or her own process. What matters is that your child feels safe and respected. Note any changes you may detect, and discuss them – after consulting your son or daughter – with the therapist.

Need more information?

On the Internet: [\(address of national EMDR website to be filled in by each country\)](#)

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E M D R

Just re-record it

Teenagers

Whatever's bothering you probably has something to do with the horrible things that have happened to you. It could be to do with an accident, a fire, a physical assault, bullying, or some other horrible experience. Perhaps it happened just once, but it may even have been something that lasted for months or even years. Experiences like that can change the way you feel. Whatever happened may just keep playing over and over again in your head like a film, or you may not feel like doing anything, or maybe it's stopping you from sleeping properly. You may also get angry quickly or have trouble concentrating.

EMDR information

Just re-record it

Many young people find it strange that they suddenly react so differently. But that's all because of memories of the upsetting experience(s). And the awful feelings and horrible thoughts that go with it. Luckily, something can be done to help them out quickly. It's called EMDR.

Faster than you think

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) is a therapy for children, teenagers, and adults who have been through one or more disturbing experiences, which have caused them to suffer psychological problems. Scientists believe that in those cases memories of upsetting experiences aren't stored properly in the memory bank. When that has been improved by EMDR, the problems that have brought you here will also fade or disappear altogether.

The nice thing about EMDR is that you start to notice improvements quickly. When you've had a single bad experience, you'll probably be finished with the therapy sooner than someone who has been threatened or bullied over a longer period of time. But even then, EMDR can be very helpful.

Lisa, 17 years old:

"Just look at what I've achieved!"

"When I first started, I was having nightmares. They seemed so real it was as if I was still being abused. I was having trouble sleeping, and wasn't able to concentrate during the day, so my schoolwork was going really badly as well. I blamed myself for the sexual abuse. I thought it was some sort of punishment for something I'd done wrong in the past. Now I just get angry when I think back to how I felt responsible for the actions of my cousin. I know and feel now that I'm worth just as much as anyone else, which is why I also deserve respect. Those nightmares don't bother me any longer. I'm sleeping better, and things are going well in school as well, because I'm in better shape now. I thought it was a bit odd doing those eye movements. Just look at what I've achieved. I'm a lot more self-assured, and I am not worried anymore that it could happen to me again."

What choice is there?

First the therapist will ask you to tell the story of what has happened, and then to freeze-frame the story at the 'picture' that is the most disturbing to look at right now.

The two of you will work out a way for you not to feel bad anymore when you are reminded of what happened back then. The way it works is this: while you're concentrating on the picture, and on what you're thinking and feeling about it now, the therapist will ask you to do something completely different at the same time. This could be, either:

- following the fingers of the therapist with your eyes, as they move them from side to side in front of your face, *or*
- listening to sounds on the headphones, *or*
- tapping the hands of the therapist with your hands (or they can tap yours)

Once in a while, the therapist will ask you what you're noticing or what's changing. This could include images, thoughts or feelings, but also possibly include physical sensations such as tension or pain. Sometimes, stuff comes to the surface that you don't want to tell, or are scared to. Don't worry, you won't have to. The therapy will carry on until you are not affected anymore by memories of that experience.

May be edgy

Don't be surprised if you're focused more than usual on your upsetting experience(s) or stuff related to those experiences during your therapy period. This is a result of the brain's mechanism of reprocessing the information being activated. This reprocessing may not stop as soon you leave here. You may get a bit anxious or edgy; fortunately that's usually gone about three days after a therapy session. You may even feel better straight away.

Jay, 13 years old:

“It just happens by itself”

“When I started those eye movements, lots of things started happening straight away. Pictures, thoughts, feelings. Sometimes it was stuff that seemed to have nothing to do with it. There were loads of things that just flashed past. But the therapist helps you really well: all you have to say, when you stop the tapping or the eye movements, is whatever you're feeling, what's changing, or whatever enters your head. At first I thought that I had to freeze the first picture or bring it back. But you don't have to control or hold onto anything. That's what's so special about this therapy. It just happens by itself. You just need to have the guts to concentrate on yourself. That's it really.”

Kelly, 15 years old:

"At first I thought: this stuff is weird"

"It was definitely really hard the first time, because I wasn't sure just what to expect. You are explained certain stuff at the start, but it was still a bit vague. I just thought: this stuff is weird. Oh well, whatever. It won't help me anyway."

"I also dreaded having to talk to someone about what I'd been through, because I'd never done that before. The first step is to learn to trust that person, and to try to feel at ease. That way, you can focus and get more from the therapy. EMDR is very different though to what they call 'talk therapy', as talking does help in a way, but it doesn't make the experience feel less bad. What's so good about this therapy is that you're working on your nasty memories, which really helps you to move on."

"I didn't have to do a lot of talking during the therapy, which I liked. We processed the things I'd been through bit by bit. Until we'd dealt with the lot. It was really tough having to concentrate on a memory that I'd always tried to put as far at the back of my mind as I could. But you start to think differently, and your bad feelings change and fade away. I felt less and less scared, tense, and guilty. Now I can look back on it without it turning my whole life upside down all the time."

Need some more questions answered?

Why not take a look at the leaflet that your parents or guardians have been given. You can also fire away any questions you have at your own therapist. They won't mind.