

What Does an EMDR Session Look Like?

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When I begin working with a client who wants to use EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) Therapy, I always take time to explain to them what an EMDR session looks like before actually conducting EMDR Therapy. Why? Because it's a very different approach to therapy than what most clients expect or are familiar with.

So what does a session look like?

EMDR Therapy follows an eight-phase model. The EMDR International Association (EMDRIA) has provided a nice overview of these phases, which I strongly urge you to read (<http://www.emdria.org/?120>), based on excerpts from, F. Shapiro & M. S. Forrest. (2004). EMDR: The Breakthrough Therapy for Anxiety, Stress and Trauma. New York: BasicBooks.

According to the EMDRIA article,

The goal of EMDR therapy is to process completely the experiences that are causing problems, and to include new ones that are needed for full health. "Processing" does not mean talking about it. "Processing" means setting up a learning state that will allow experiences that are causing problems to be "digested" and stored appropriately in your brain. That means that what is useful to you from an experience will be learned, and stored with appropriate emotions in your brain, and be able to guide you in positive ways in the future. The inappropriate emotions, beliefs, and body sensations will be discarded.

As this quote suggests, EMDR is not talk therapy. In fact, there is typically very little talking in an EMDR session (i.e., after phases one and two, which are *History and Treatment Planning* and *Preparation*). At the beginning of the session (i.e., during phases three through seven), the client is supported to become "relaxed and ready." A memory or issue is then selected, and some key questions are asked which tap into the current experience of that memory or issue. These questions elicit various information, including current emotions, beliefs, and body sensations, which are activated when thinking about the memory/issue. For example, when recalling an incident of being bullied in childhood, the client may presently think, "I'm helpless," may feel angry, and may experience tightness in their throat. They will also be asked to rate how disturbed they feel, in the moment, from zero (none, neutral) to ten (the highest disturbance they can imagine).

At this point, the client is often feeling quite activated as they are giving full attention to something upsetting that they probably usually try to ignore. Then, bilateral stimulation is added (i.e., this could include having the client move their eyes horizontally, holding buzzies that alternate pulses between each hand, using a headset that alternates beeps into each ear, etc.). The client's job is to simply "notice" what happens...to pay attention to anything that comes into their awareness, whether that is thoughts, feelings, body sensations, sensory information, etc. I explain that this is much like riding on a train and simply noticing things out the window, with curiosity, without judgment. They are not directing the train; they are simply a passenger. The therapist is also not steering the train. The therapist's job is to create a safe place where noticing can happen, where the

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brain can naturally “process” the event. Part of creating safety for the client is by helping the client turn down the emotion if it feels too intense. This helps to ensure that the client can safely explore the memory without being re-traumatized by the event.

This is where EMDR Therapy and talk therapy diverge significantly. In talk therapy, “processing” typically involves dissecting, analyzing, challenging, and reframing the thoughts and feelings that a client is experiencing. Thus, if a client says, “that experience made me feel helpless,” the therapist may explore the validity of that statement (Are you really helpless? What is the evidence of that?), the roots of the belief (When did you first start feeling helpless?), mastery experiences (When is a time that you didn’t feel helpless – where you felt like you had mastery or power?), feelings regarding the event (How did that make you feel?), or what they want their future to look like (What would you have liked to say in that situation? What if that were to happen again; what would you say now? What advice would you give to someone else who might find themselves in a similar situation?).

In EMDR Therapy, if a client says, “I am helpless,” feels sad, has tense shoulders, etc., the therapist will simply instruct them to “notice it.” This is one of the most challenging tasks for clients, as many of us are used to trying to solve problems or turn off emotions. In EMDR Therapy, we resolve challenging thoughts and feelings by being present with them. Does that mean we wallow? Sometimes. Does that mean we allow feelings of anger or jealousy to flow? Yup. Does that mean we don’t challenge unhealthy thought patterns? Correct.

In EMDR Therapy we believe that the brain was designed to heal from traumatic experiences naturally, if the circumstances are right. Thus, our job as therapists is to create the right environment for the client to be present with their thoughts, feelings, body sensations, etc., no matter how complicated or disturbing, so that natural healing can occur. When this happens, we see clients move from distressing thoughts and emotions to healthy, adaptive thoughts accompanied by calm and peaceful emotions and body sensations. Clients often describe feeling an internal shift in their core beliefs, and memories that once caused distress no longer elicit an emotional or physical reaction.

Once the client gets to a 0/10 disturbance level on a particular memory/issue, we then “install” the newfound positive belief and good feelings in the body. This is done by having the client notice these (e.g., I’m not helpless, my body feels strong) while again adding bilateral stimulation. Next, we have the client imagine a future scenario where they might need these new resources and we have them play the scenario through in their mind, like a movie. If any distress is identified, it too is processed. Once the memory is thoroughly processed and no longer disturbing, it remains that way. That is, the person will still recall the event and can logically acknowledge that it was a negative experience, but they will no longer feel disturbance as they reflect on it. The brain has healed itself.

If you would like more information about EMDR Therapy or would like to give it a try, please contact Darlene at info@eckert-psychology.com. We would be honored to join you in your healing journey!

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References

What is the actual EMDR session like? (no date). Retrieved from
<http://www.emdria.org/?120>

Susan is a Registered Psychologist providing assessment and counselling services at Eckert Centre. Susan makes a unique contribution to the Centre as a Certified EMDR Therapist, counselling those dealing with the effects of big and "little" traumas in their life, including adoption, accidents, loss, abuse, neglect, bullying, infertility, academic challenges, imperfect parenting, phobias, addictions, etc. She also provides faith based counseling services to our clients seeking counseling from a Christian worldview, and works with individuals, couples, and families.