

## WHAT IS EMDR?

### MODEL OF HOW THE BRAIN RESOLVE ISSUES

Do you ever have the experience of having a seemingly intractable problem during the day and wake up the next morning with an idea of how to resolve the issue? Scientists have come up with an explanation for how people can “sleep on” a problem and somehow figure out a solution the next morning.

Our brain does not shut down during sleep. In fact, during the rapid eye movement (REM) phase of our sleep, our brain will try to integrate the events of the day with our life experiences. By comparing current issues with events of the past, our brain may figure out a solution to the issues. A scary event may not be as scary as we think, or a challenging issue may not seem so challenging after all.

In case of a trauma, when our lives are threatened and escape seems impossible, we get scared and try not to think about it. It works to some degree. The memory gets put away, but it would not get processed during our REM sleep. When something reminds us of the traumatic memory, we can have a flashback and re-experience the trauma all over again.

In EMDR, which stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, the client would go through a similar process as in REM sleep. Under the guidance of the therapist, the client would move his or her eyes left and right, while recalling the trauma with all its sensory/emotional content and letting the mind to freely associate. The therapist will stop the client periodically to check to see what the client has come up with and, if needed, may re-focus the free association process back to the trauma itself. As the EMDR progresses, the client would come up with a resolution to the trauma. The memory would remain but the strong reaction the trauma would be reduced or completely gone, e. g., the client would feel safe again.

EMDR is a proven technique for processing trauma and is especially effective for dealing with isolated incidences of trauma. It is one of the main protocols used in VA hospitals to help soldiers deal with their PTSD. It is also a protocol used to help survivors of natural and man-made disasters, such as earthquakes and massacres.

Note: There is also evidence that trauma can affect our brain structures. The hippocampus, the gateway to our past experiences may actually shrink, making it harder for the brain to process a trauma with our life experiences. Our amygdala, the sensor for danger, would get sensitized making us hypervigilant to any hints of danger. The corpus callosum, the nerve bundle between the left and right brain may shrink as well, making it harder to process the emotional content of the trauma with our rational mind. By affecting our brain structures, the trauma keeps us in a constant state of hypervigilance while preventing us from effectively resolving the traumatic event. With EMDR, brain studies have shown increase in hippocampus size, and improved functioning in the amygdala and other brain structures.