

APPENDIX 1

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# QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED ABOUT EMDR

Children may ask you or their parents about EMDR: what it means and how it works. The following appendixes are examples of the handouts I share with my clients and their families.

## **WHAT IS EMDR?**

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is a method that helps relieve posttraumatic stress. It is used for reducing fears and anxiety as well as for strengthening feelings of calm and confidence.

## **WHAT DOES "DESENSITIZATION" MEAN?**

Desensitization is the process of becoming comfortable with a memory of an event that was scary, but is currently over or harmless. For example, you might be scared to ride a bike again after falling while riding. Remembering the accident might be so scary that it prevents you from riding a bike again—at least for a while. If you practice riding slowly, first on grass, then on the sidewalk, and also talk about the frightening experience, the memory of the accident could become "desensitized" so that the thought of riding is no longer as scary. Remembering the event becomes comfortable, like looking at an old photo or movie. In fact, when desensitization is complete, riding a bike could be something fun and exciting, not scary at all.

If it's reasonable to expect that an incident will never happen again, desensitization can allow you to look at the memory calmly. If the event is something like a medical procedure that you will face again, desensitization of old memories will make it easier to prepare

for the future. EMDR can help desensitization of upsetting memories happen quickly.

**WHAT DOES "REPROCESSING" MEAN?**

"Reprocessing" is a psychological term that means to work on understanding a memory so that the memory becomes useful instead of just scary. Going back to the example of the bike accident, you might have thought, "I'm not good enough to ride a bike. I can't handle new experiences. I'll get hurt if I try anything new." If you continued to believe that, you might be miserable and miss out on a lot. If you "reprocess" the memory of that experience, you might think, "It's over now. I am good enough to ride a bike. It's safe for me to try new activities. I can handle normal risks." EMDR lets people "reprocess" memories in a way that helps them be more comfortable and confident when it's appropriate to be calm.

**HOW WAS EMDR DISCOVERED?**

In 1987, Dr. Francine Shapiro discovered that eye movement can help to make memories less upsetting. One day when she was walking in the park, she was bothered by some disturbing memories. As she walked, the memories became less disturbing. She wondered what she had been doing that made the memories less upsetting, and she realized that she had been moving her eyes quickly back and forth.

At the time, Dr. Shapiro was a psychologist helping war veterans. She wondered whether her clients would feel less upset by memories of war if she guided them to move their eyes back and forth. It worked! Since that time, EMDR has evolved into a sophisticated method for treating trauma, anxiety, and stress.

**IS EMDR HYPNOSIS?**

No, EMDR is not hypnosis. During hypnosis, EEG readings indicate that there is an increase in alpha, beta, or theta waves, which has been associated with an increase in suggestibility, EEG patterns of people during EMDR therapy show brain waves that are within

normal waking parameters. In EMDR, the person is actually less susceptible than usual to information that is not correct.

### **HOW AND WHY DOES THE EYE-MOVEMENT COMPONENT OF EMDR WORK?**

We don't know exactly why the eye-movement component of the treatment is effective, but we have some theories. EMDR may work in a way that is similar to rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep, the period of sleep during which we dream while moving our eyes. Dreams often help to clear up small traumas so that they aren't upsetting anymore. EMDR, like dreams, may stimulate our natural brain process that makes difficult experiences more acceptable, or at least less upsetting.

When something traumatic or very upsetting happens to us, information about the event seems to go around and around in our brains, probably so that we will avoid any situation that reminds us of the traumatic event. Getting upset every time we remember isn't very helpful. EMDR helps to get the old memory "unstuck," or "desensitized and reprocessed," so that it will become useful information, rather than upsetting information.

### **WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU "DO" EMDR?**

EMDR may involve moving your eyes while you focus on your memory of an upsetting event. You may choose a wand or a sand-tray figure to watch while I move it back and forth. It may feel upsetting or scary to remember the traumatic incident when you begin. The memory will become less and less upsetting while you move your eyes.

Remember, while you do EMDR, you are in charge. You may close your eyes, turn your head, or put up your hand to indicate that you want to stop to rest or to talk. Please say which direction and speed of eye movement feels best to you. Some people like to move their eyes back and forth for a minute or two, rest, then continue eye movement; others like to keep moving their eyes for a while, until they feel very relaxed.

If you don't like moving your eyes, we can try alternately tapping

your hands to stimulate your brain to start processing the upsetting memories. We'll practice using different techniques. You can choose the one you like best.

### **HOW WILL WE BEGIN?**

We will probably begin your introduction to EMDR by doing some imagination exercises. For example, I may ask you to imagine a "safe place." (You may prefer to remember a time you had fun or a time you learned something. That would be fine too.) The safe place can be somewhere that you can feel safe, relaxed, and comfortable. You can choose a place that is real or imaginary. When you have the picture of the safe place in mind, I'll ask you to concentrate on noticing the feelings of safety, relaxation, and comfort in your body.

You might practice using your imagination to "dial up" those feelings so that they are stronger or so that the relaxation spreads through your body. Next, we may use EMDR while you focus on the safe place so that you may experience how EMDR can help to strengthen the soothing work your imagination has already begun.

Later, when you are ready (usually not in our first meeting), you can begin to "desensitize and reprocess" upsetting memories. When you begin to concentrate on the traumatic memory you may feel anxious. You may notice tension in your body. Gradually, you will notice that EMDR prompts your natural healing system to erase excess fear so that you can feel calmer and more confident.

### **WHAT DOES EMDR FEEL LIKE?**

Some people say that EMDR feels relaxing. Some say dreamy. Others say "weird." When you move your eyes while thinking about a painful memory, your anxiety may decrease right away or it may increase before it subsides. Sometimes it helps to imagine that you are just watching the event on a video or that you are viewing it through a train window. Any way you feel is okay. All you have to do is notice. EMDR can work to help you feel more confident, calmer, and happier, regardless of whether you experience it as relaxing, dreamy, weird, or even annoying. While you move your eyes, you may notice that mental pictures, thoughts, feelings, or body sensations come to your attention. This is normal. You may

not have any particular visual images, thoughts, feelings or body sensations. This is normal too.

### **AM I CRAZY? CAN EMDR HELP?**

People who suffer from posttraumatic symptoms sometimes wonder if they are crazy. It feels crazy to worry all the time and to think the same bothersome thoughts over and over. It feels crazy to let fears get in the way of doing things you want to do. You are not crazy, and you will feel much better when EMDR helps you make the best of what has happened to you.

### **WHAT CAN EMDR DO FOR ME?**

EMDR can help you get in touch with your own inner power so that you can look back on old memories calmly, get over fears, and prepare for stressful events. It can help you feel braver and more confident. It can help you believe what is useful and self-enhancing, so that you develop more self-esteem. EMDR can only prompt you to erase useless information or excess anxiety and can only reinforce what is true.

### **WHAT CAN'T EMDR DO FOR ME?**

EMDR cannot make you feel safe if you are not safe. That is, EMDR cannot take away appropriate protective fear responses. For example, EMDR cannot make someone feel safe riding on a steep, rough road if he doesn't have the skills or equipment to do it. EMDR can only help you be calmer (which could help you to think faster in an emergency).

EMDR can't get you to do something you don't want to do or to like something that you don't want to like. For example, if you were pressured into riding a bike and you don't want to do it, EMDR can't change your true opinions.

### **CAN I TRY EMDR ON MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS?**

Please do not use EMDR on anyone. Although EMDR may appear simple, it is actually a sophisticated method that requires special

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expertise. Only licensed professionals who have trained in a program approved by the EMDR International Association should use EMDR. Sometimes upsetting memories unexpectedly come up during EMDR, and professionals know how to keep the "desensitization and reprocessing" safe and successful.