Trauma Matters

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

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Every Memory Deserves Respect

EMDR, the Proven Trauma Therapy with the Power to Heal

by Michael Baldwin & Deborah Korn, PsyD.

In 1987, psychologist Francine Shapiro made a discovery during a walk in the park. While walking, she was thinking about some recent disturbing events in her life. As she considered these events, she became aware that her eyes were moving back and forth. As her eyes moved, she noticed that the negative emotional charge of the painful memories that had driven her to the park that day subsided dramatically. She began exploring the connection between "bilateral" (back-and-forth) eye movements and the diminishing or "desensitization" of anxiety. She eventually developed a full treatment around this feature and conducted controlled research and case studies to evaluate its effects. She named the approach Eye Movement Desensitization—EMD—and later changed the name to EMDR—Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy. That's exactly what it is—a psychotherapy for desensitizing anxiety (taking away or lowering distress) and reprocessing traumatic memories. And yes, it's also a mouthful and an earful. We know.

What Dr. Shapiro came to prove was that trauma victims are actually able to experience a reduction in symptoms and start experiencing a level of peace and healing within a few sessions. Previously, this kind of change had been possible only after years of talk therapy—if ever.

Subsequently, EMDR has been intensively studied and proven effective—and efficient—in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD develops in response to a traumatic experience that causes intense fear, helplessness, or horror. EMDR therapy is recognized as an effective form of treatment for PTSD by the American Psychiatric Association, the World Health Organization, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, and the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense. More than a hundred thousand clinicians throughout the world use the therapy, and millions of people have been treated successfully over the past thirty years.

Before EMDR therapy, it was widely assumed that severe emotional pain requires a long time to heal. Extensive research has shown EMDR to be an effective form of treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, with up to 90 percent of adults who experienced a single traumatic event no longer presenting with PTSD after only three ninety-minute sessions. Research also supports the use of EMDR therapy with people who have experienced repeated trauma, including significant forms of child abuse and neglect. In an important early EMDR study, 77 percent of traumatized combat veterans were free of PTSD in just twelve sessions. And in another early study at a medical and psychiatric treatment center, 100 percent of single-trauma and 77 percent of multiple-trauma survivors no longer met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD after six fifty-minute EMDR sessions. This study concluded that EMDR was, without question, more effective than the center's "standard care" in reducing the symptoms of PTSD, coexisting depression, and anxiety. A recent meta-analysis found that EMDR was not only clinically effective but also the most cost-effective of the eleven trauma therapies evaluated in the treatment of adults with PTSD.

I had the honor of consulting on a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health that evaluated the effects of eight sessions of EMDR therapy compared with eight weeks of taking Prozac for the treatment of PTSD. EMDR was superior for

(Continued from page 1)

reducing both PTSD symptoms and depression. By the end of treatment, 100 percent of those traumatized as adults had lost their PTSD diagnosis, and 73 percent of those with childhood trauma histories no longer had a PTSD diagnosis. At a six-month follow-up, with no additional EMDR therapy beyond the initial eight sessions, 89 percent of the childhood abuse survivors had lost their PTSD diagnosis. Furthermore, 33 percent were considered completely asymptomatic.

Once traumatic experiences and their related triggers have been processed, we expect to see a reduction or even a complete remission in a wide range of problems and symptoms. In addition to applications with obvious trauma-related problems and diagnoses, EMDR is being used to treat people of all ages—who may or may not have PTSD—suffering from depression, anxiety, phobias, pain, eating disorders, addictions, psychotic disorders, and medically unexplained physical symptoms. It's being used with combat veterans and first responders (police, firefighters, EMTs, doctors, and nurses) as well as with groups of people in the immediate aftermath of "critical incidents" or disasters, such as mass shootings, hurricanes and floods, and terrorist attacks. With EMDR therapy at my disposal during the coronavirus pandemic, I was able to effectively and efficiently treat frontline workers (employed in grocery stores, hospitals, and home- less shelters), those who had been on ventilators in the ICU, and those who had suffered devastating losses of loved ones.

EMDR therapy is based on the idea that psychological difficulties are related to the brain's failure to adequately process traumatic memories. Of course, most mental health experts support the notion that past experiences have at least something to do with our current personalities, coping styles, relationship difficulties, and psychological struggles. This idea is certainly not new. However, EMDR therapy specifically searches for and addresses memories related to current dysfunction. As memories are adequately processed with EMDR, symptoms recede and memories get more effectively connected to other related memories and information, allowing shifts in thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical sensations. Healing involves spontaneous movement toward positive thinking and more manageable feelings, and a significant reduction in distress and anxiety experienced in one's body.

The theory behind EMDR argues that the mind can heal from psychological trauma in the same way the body heals from physical trauma; we are all physiologically geared toward the achievement of optimal health. If you have been physically injured and left with a wound, the body will naturally and spontaneously mobilize to heal that wound. The body may need a little help removing barriers (i.e., infection) to healing, but it clearly knows what to do.

When people come into treatment, typically their world is quite small. They have pulled back because so many things in their day-to-day experience and relationships with other people have become "triggers" for them, activating overwhelming emotions and distress. They are feeling isolated, or hopeless, or defective. But what I have always loved about this work is that people get better. With all that we know today about effective treatment, I can confidently say to a client in the first session, "You were injured—perhaps in many different ways, emotionally, physically, sexually—but you can recover. This is not something you were born with or need to keep living with. We will do the work, together, and you will heal." That, to me, is an incredibly hopeful and wonderful way to start a journey with someone.

Before learning EMDR, I spent years treating trauma survivors with various other approaches but was far from satisfied with the results I was getting. In 1992, when I introduced EMDR to my outpatient and inpatient clients at a large, private psychiatric hospital, I quickly became convinced that this novel treatment promised a level of healing like nothing I had ever seen before. Several decades later, EMDR therapy remains my treatment of choice, and I am excited to tell you all about it. But before Michael and I can take you through how EMDR heals, it's vital for you to understand what trauma actually is—and isn't—and what typically needs healing in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. We'll begin in these first three chapters by defining trauma and unpacking the relationships between trauma and one's mind, body, brain, behavior, heart, and spirit. And then, in chapter 4, we'll dive into the nuts and bolts of EMDR therapy.

This article is provided as an exceprt from Dr. Korn and Mr. Baldwin's new book: Every Memory Deserves Respect: EMDR, the Proven Trauma Therapy with the Power to Heal. Buy it where books are sold.