

# EMDR THERAPY FOR VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS

## WHAT IS EMDR THERAPY?

**EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It is a form of therapy that helps people heal from trauma or other distressing life experiences.**



## HOW EMDR HELPS

Our brains have a natural way to recover from traumatic memories and events. This process involves communication between the amygdala (the alarm signal for stressful events), the hippocampus (which assists with learning, including memories about safety and danger), and the prefrontal cortex (which analyzes and controls behavior and emotion). While many times traumatic experiences can be managed and resolved spontaneously, they may not be processed without help. Stress responses are part of our natural fight, flight, or freeze instincts. When distress from a disturbing event remains, the upsetting images, thoughts, and emotions may create feelings of overwhelm, of being back in that moment, or of being frozen in time. EMDR therapy helps the brain process these memories and allows normal healing to resume. The experience is still remembered, but the fight, flight, or freeze response from the original event is resolved, and the memory feels farther away.

## RECOGNITION

**EMDR therapy has been extensively researched and is recognized as an effective treatment for PTSD by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs /Department of Defense.**

Other organizations that recognize EMDR therapy as effective are the American Psychiatric Association, Australian National Medical Health and Research Council, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, U.K. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the World Health Organization among other national and international organizations.

## WHAT EMDR IS LIKE

After you and your therapist agree that EMDR therapy is a good fit, and begin to work together, you will be asked to focus on a specific event. Attention will be given to a negative image, belief, and body feeling related to this event, and then to a positive belief that would indicate the issue was resolved. While you bring up the upsetting event, the therapist will begin sets of side-to-side eye movements, sounds, or taps. You will then be asked to notice what comes to mind after each set. You may experience shifts of insight or changes in images, feelings, or beliefs regarding the event. The sets of eye movements, sounds, or taps are repeated until the event becomes less disturbing. Your job during EMDR is to simply pay attention to what is happening 'on the inside' and tell the therapist. You are in control of the treatment process.



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Traumatic events happen quite often. Half of U.S. adults report exposure to at least one lifetime traumatic event. The nature of military work (e.g. combat operations, peace keeping missions, and high-risk situations) creates a greater chance of exposure to witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event for service members. With greater exposure comes increased risk for traumatic signs and symptoms which may cause ongoing distress and require treatment. EMDR is a simple and efficient therapy that addresses the underlying cause of distress and helps the brain process and heal troubling memories for veterans and service members.

## TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

- Depression, sadness, isolation
- Avoiding situations that are reminders of the event(s)
- Difficulty functioning in daily life
- Exaggerated startle response, feeling on edge
- Flashbacks/nightmares that relive the traumatic event(s)
- Anger/Difficulty controlling aggressive impulses
- Sense of numbness of feelings in life
- Shame, guilt, intense worry/anxiety
- Addictive behaviors
- Difficulty being in public places/crowds
- Involvement in high-risk behaviors
- Avoiding community activities
- Marital/Family issues
- High desire to control or protect
- Survivor's guilt
- Chronic pain, headaches, medically unexplained symptoms
- Thoughts of 'I don't deserve to get help'

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**"I DIDN'T KNOW IT COULD BE LIKE THIS. IT'S LIKE I'VE GOT ON A DIFFERENT PAIR OF GLASSES. STRANGE. SO FRESH. I'M SO SURPRISED. YOU HELPED ME SEE. I FEEL LIGHTER."**

-IRAQ WAR VETERAN WITH PTSD TREATED WITH EMDR THERAPY [1]