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Length of treatment

With the simpler traumas and distressing events of adult life, EMDR can be very rapid in its effects.

The average treatment times are from three to five sessions.

With more complex traumas, which have stayed with us for longer, or which happened when you were young, EMDR is more likely to be part of a much bigger piece of work; one which may stretch over a number of months or years

Contact us

For more information about EMDR, please ask to speak to the clinical psychologist in your area.

For information on Trust services visit www.awp.nhs.uk

PALS

To make a comment, raise a concern or make a complaint, please contact the Trust's Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).

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Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership
NHS Trust

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

This is one of a series of information leaflets on psychological therapies for service users. The therapy is described, what it involves, and the kinds of problem it may be helpful for

You matter, we care

What is EMDR?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a psychological therapy for trauma and some other mental health problems. It was developed just over 20 years ago by a clinical psychologist in the United States, Francine Shapiro.

What is it used for?

At first, the therapy was used just to treat traumatic memories (raw and intrusive thoughts, feelings, pictures, sounds, smells, tastes, and body sensations), which might, for example, develop as a result of:

- an assault
- a road traffic accident
- a natural disaster like a flood or fire or very severe storm
- a 'not straightforward' surgical operation
- neglect or bullying in childhood
- admission to hospital with sudden mental illness
- experiences associated with war or with being a refugee

These days EMDR may also be used to treat feelings of grief or bereavement, phobias, anxieties of various sorts and pain. However, its most familiar use is still the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

What happens first?

The therapist will carry out an assessment to work out whether EMDR is suitable for the problems you have described.

You will be asked about your difficulties, whether you have physical problems, if you are taking medication and what support you have.

The therapist will spend some time doing preparatory exercises with you, so you can rapidly deal with any emotional disturbance that may arise during or after a session. These may include breathing retraining or deep muscle relaxation.

Time is taken to explain the therapy and to address any concerns you may have.

What does EMDR involve?

Much of what then makes up the therapy is similar to other well-known therapies.

The unusual feature of EMDR is the way in which the therapist seeks to target the sources of your distress by stimulating the two sides of your brain (its left and right hemispheres). Usually, this is done by eye movements.

You watch the therapist passing his or her hand fairly rapidly backwards and forwards across your field of vision, while at the same time she or he helps you, as you recall the difficult events from the past.

At all times you remain conscious. A lot of importance is attached to giving you a sense of being in control of what happens in the work.

How does EMDR work?

When people are involved in a distressing event, they may find themselves overwhelmed by it.

Their minds are unable to process what has occurred in the way this normally happens as an event becomes more distant and takes its place in memory.

Instead, what happened to them becomes frozen and is sometimes intensely and repeatedly relived, as if it were happening right now and not a while ago.

The alternating left-right stimulation of the brain with eye movements, or by some other means, seems to unblock the system.

The distressing events become less intense and less immediate and more like ordinary memories.