

Lakewood Counseling and Career Center

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EMDR: Could this new therapy tool work for you?

By Kris Koestner

A woman sexually assaulted as a teenager, a man struggling with the aftermath of an abusive childhood, a teenager who witnessed a friend's drug overdose, a young woman afraid to fly. What do these people have in common? A powerful new therapy tool called EMDR (**E**ye **M**ovement **D**esensitization and **R**eprocessing), which decreased their distress and brought relief from symptoms such as sleeplessness, flashbacks, depression, and anxiety.

One of the most exciting things about EMDR is how quickly it is able to produce relief and healing. While not a panacea, this new therapy tool appears to work about 90% of the time. It is now considered the treatment of choice for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

When it was first discovered in the early 1980's by Dr. Francine Shapiro, EMDR was considered primarily a treatment for trauma. It has been used successfully with Vietnam Vets, survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Emergency Medical Personnel who confront horrific experiences in the course of their jobs. However, as the number of mental health professionals trained in EMDR has grown, so has awareness of other potential uses. It can reduce anxiety, reduce phobias (even those of long-standing duration), enhance performance, and help change dysfunctional or maladaptive behaviors.

What EMDR seems to do is access our own internal accelerated processing system. It is believed that EMDR is similar to the REM (rapid eye movement) stage of sleep.

When we dream, we are in the REM stage of sleep. Research has shown that in this sleep state we process the day's experiences. People denied REM sleep become disoriented, irritable and even psychotic over time.

EMDR allows this processing to occur in an awake, conscious state. When trauma occurs, or our system is flooded with disturbing sensations, the experience seems to get stuck in the central nervous system. For whatever reason, the person is not able to "digest" or metabolize the trauma. Symptoms such as depression, anxiety, nightmares, etc. are the result. People often suffer with these symptoms for years.

While traditional psychotherapy can and does provide relief, the process tends to be lengthy. One of the most exciting things about EMDR is how quickly it provides healing. For instance, in my own caseload here at Lakewood Counseling, clients have been helped in as few as 3 – 5 sessions. Others with more extensive histories of abuse or trauma will require more sessions; however, even in those cases, EMDR can significantly shorten the healing process.

If you are interested in reading more, Dr. Shapiro has written a book full of case histories and clinical examples of EMDR and its uses. The book, [EMDR, The Breakthrough Therapy for Overcoming Anxiety, Stress and Trauma](#), is available at most major book stores.

EMDR is not appropriate for everyone; those trained in the technique can screen potential candidates to determine suitability. Here at Lakewood Counseling two of our therapists have been trained in using EMDR. They are Kris Koestner and Janet Overman. Feel free to contact one of us to learn more.