

Understanding E.M.D.R.

The once-experimental trauma treatment has become increasingly popular. Here's how the therapy works.

The following is excerpted from the article, 'One Foot in the Present, One Foot in the Past:'
Understanding E.M.D.R., by Dani Blum of The New York Times, September 19, 2022.

Trauma shoves a mind into overdrive. The brain tries to block out fragments of disaster: the spray of shattered glass as one car slammed into another, the smell of smoke. People with [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) sometimes constrict their lives, avoiding streets or smells or songs that make them think about what they've experienced. But memories make themselves known — in nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts.

Over the past decade, a seemingly unconventional treatment has wedged its way into mainstream therapy.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy, better known as E.M.D.R., might look bizarre to an observer. The practice involves coaxing people to process traumatic memories while simultaneously interacting with images, sounds or sensations that activate both sides of the brain. The idea is to anchor the brain in the current moment as a patient recalls the past.

Patients who seek out E.M.D.R. may be inspired by: "The Body Keeps the Score," a seminal book on trauma that has stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for over 200 weeks. Bessel van der Kolk, the book's author, touts the treatment as one of the most effective ways to combat PTSD symptoms. "It's not really an innovative treatment anymore," he said. "It's something that's very well-established."

What is E.M.D.R.?

The psychologist Francine Shapiro developed E.M.D.R. in 1987 as she grappled with her own disturbing memory — first, [experimenting on herself](#), flitting her eyes back and forth as she walked through a park, and then gradually expanding the treatment to other people.

Therapists carry out E.M.D.R. in eight phases that typically unfold over six to 12 sessions, although that number varies from person to person. Each session tends to last between 60 and 90 minutes. First, a therapist will discuss the patient's current challenges, gathering information about their history, and then propose a plan for treatment, said Deborah Korn, a clinician and co-author of "Every Memory Deserves Respect."

The patient may need to "float back" from their current symptoms, she said, exploring a recent emotional outburst or panic attack to isolate the triggers that provoked it. The goal is to identify a traumatic memory that a patient can work through in the later E.M.D.R. phases.

How does E.M.D.R. work?

Pushing a patient to deliberately revisit the past isn't a feature of just E.M.D.R.; most therapies for PTSD, including prolonged exposure and cognitive processing therapy, prompt patients to "actively go toward the trauma," said Dr. Shaili Jain, a PTSD specialist at Stanford University.

Revisiting trauma can activate the body's stress response — cortisol levels spike and heart rate jumps. But over time, the process can gradually desensitize you to your memories, habituating your body to the stress and anxiety you experience when confronted with a reminder of the trauma.

"With E.M.D.R., we really see people move the past back into the past," Dr. Korn said. The theory behind E.M.D.R. is that memories become less vivid and emotional when a patient can't focus on them completely.

Is E.M.D.R. effective?

Today, clinicians generally consider E.M.D.R. an effective treatment for trauma. The [World Health Organization](#) and [American Psychological Association](#) have recommended it for people with PTSD and have issued guidelines for administering treatment.

While E.M.D.R. is most likely effective, Dr. Cuijpers said, he cautioned against wholeheartedly endorsing the evidence behind the treatment. Still, there are patients and clinicians who swear by the treatment — and enough "solid data" to back it, Dr. Jain said. Patients report fewer PTSD symptoms after sessions, Dr. Wright said, with fewer flashbacks and intrusive thoughts.

Who could E.M.D.R. work for?

"Anybody who has experienced trauma" could benefit from E.M.D.R., said Trisha Miller, a psychotherapist at the Cleveland Clinic. People with mental health conditions beyond PTSD, like depression, eating disorders, phobias and addictions may also benefit from E.M.D.R., she added, although there is not yet robust research confirming that the treatment is effective for those conditions.

People seeking E.M.D.R. practitioners should make sure they find a certified specialist, Ms. Miller stressed. The E.M.D.R. International Association, which runs certification and training for the therapy, keeps a [directory](#) of practitioners who have been trained and certified by the organization.