

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation Processing) for Children and Young People

Information for Parents and Carers

This page is about EMDR (eye movement desensitisation reprocessing) a type of psychological therapy. The leaflet has been written for parents and carers of children and young people who are considering EMDR treatment.

What is trauma?

A trauma or traumatic event is an experience which makes someone feel very frightened, out of control and they think there is a threat of serious harm or death to themselves or someone else. Examples of very frightening events are things like being badly hurt in an accident, seeing someone else getting hurt, becoming acutely unwell, undergoing intrusive or frightening treatment.

Sometimes as parents/ carers you know clearly that a specific traumatic event or memory is affecting your child. Sometimes your child may not know what the traumatic memory is because it happened a very long time ago or when your child was very young (most likely too young to talk about the event). Even when children do not remember traumatic experiences, they can sometimes show the effects through their behaviour.

When traumatic events happen they are stored in the brain in the form of sights, smells, sounds, feelings and thoughts. Often when a person is very frightened or distressed the brain does not store the memory in the usual way, they are stored in a different part of the brain and the memory gets “stuck”. This stuck memory is not processed so it still feels very real and often like it is still happening. This is why people experience symptoms such as flashback, nightmares and hyper-arousal (being on edge, anxious and easily startled) after traumatic events.

What is EMDR?

EMDR is a type of psychotherapy. It has been shown to be very effective for adults, young people and children who have had traumatic experiences. It is one of the treatments that NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) recommend for Post-Traumatic Stress (PTSD).

EMDR helps difficult memories to be processed, this is done using repeated sets of bilateral stimulation (eye movements, taps or drumming) this helps memories to become less intense.

How does EMDR work?

EMDR helps the memory to become “unstuck”, to process it. EMDR does not make you forget the event or take the memory away completely it helps the memory to be processed and stored in the usual way. With repeated sets of bilateral stimulation (eye movements, taps or drumming) the memory tends to change in a way that it loses its painful intensity and becomes a more neutral memory of the event in the past.

EMDR is not a form of hypnosis, your child will remain awake and alert throughout. They can stop the treatment at any time.

What is an EMDR session like?

After you have had an assessment with a psychologist they may recommend EMDR. If this is the case they will work closely with you and your child or young person to decide which memory or memories to work on in EMDR therapy.

EMDR involves asking the child or young person to think about or draw an upsetting memory and then follow the therapist’s fingers as they move them back and forth in front of the child’s eyes for 15-30 seconds. This is called bi-lateral eye stimulation.

Other types of bi-lateral stimulation may also be used like drumming, tapping (touching the child’s hands) or using “tappers” (an electronic hand held device that vibrates slightly like a mobile phone). Often these types of bi-lateral stimulation are used with younger children or when the traumatic memory happened at a very young age.

After the therapist has done a set of bi-lateral stimulation (lasting 15-30 seconds) they will stop and ask your child to take a deep breath and tell them what happened during the bi-lateral stimulation. Often the image of the event may have changed or new thoughts or emotions have come up. The child is then asked to hold onto this image or new thought or feeling and the therapist will do more bi-lateral stimulation (finger movements, taps or drumming). Sometimes upsetting thoughts and feeling come up and these need to be dealt with by doing more bi-lateral stimulation.

Depending on the child's age and the type of event the psychologist is working on with your child they may ask you to stay in the room during the EMDR session. Particularly with young children the psychologist may ask you to be part of the bi-lateral stimulation e.g. having your child sit on your knee and you tapping your child on the shoulders or hands. Your psychologist will talk through all of this with you before beginning EMDR and will ensure that you and your child are comfortable with the process.

Stop signal, safe place and installing resources

The psychologist will also agree with your child a stop signal to be used if they would like to stop the EMDR sessions. The psychologist will also do an exercise called "Safe place" with your child before beginning the processing of the traumatic event. "Safe place" is a relaxation technique, it can be used as refuge if processing becomes upsetting. It can also be used between EMDR sessions.

Your psychologist may also suggest "installing some resources" as part of the EMDR treatment. This involves using EMDR to build or install images that are comforting or confidence building for your child e.g. If your child is anxious it may involve asking your child to think of a time they felt confident and strengthening this memory by describing it in detail and using bi-lateral stimulation. These resource installations would be tailored to your child's needs.



How long does treatment take?

EMDR sessions are usually 60 minutes; sometimes your psychologist may suggest a longer session of 90 minutes. Sometimes for younger children these sessions will need to be shorter. EMDR sessions are usually best done on a regular basis e.g. weekly or fortnightly. The number of sessions that will be required will depend on the memory that is being worked on; typically it will take between 6-10 sessions.

Where can I find out more information about EMDR?

Further information about EMDR is available on the EMDR Association of UK and Ireland website at www.emdrassociation.org.uk

If you have any further concerns about the issues discussed, please discuss these with the psychologist who gave you this leaflet.



GIG
CYMRU
NHS
WALES

Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Cwm Taf Morgannwg
University Health Board