

Helping Local Vets Deal with Stress

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Hope Turino at work. Michael Turton Military veterans struggling to cope with the aftermath of war can now get help locally. "Give an Hour" is a community-based program offering free, professional services to veterans and their families dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Hope Turino is a licensed, certified social worker with a practice in Cold Spring and is part of "Give an Hour," which is supported by the National Association of Social Workers. Turino says that veterans have sometimes hesitated to seek counseling for PTSD, especially through military organizations, "because of the stigma associated with getting help." Instead "Give an Hour," established in 2005, uses local, private practitioners to assist veterans.

Veterans suffering from PTSD often repeatedly relive highly disturbing incidents from war in excruciatingly vivid detail. Episodes can be triggered by something as simple as an odor, a photograph, or a sound. For others, symptoms of traumatic stress can be masked, appearing instead as depression, avoidance, or increased use of alcohol.

Turino and other counselors now use an innovative form of therapy to help vets put an end to reliving such traumatic memories. The process, "Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing" (EMDR) was actually discovered by chance in 1989. Dr. Francine Shapiro, a psychologist, while experiencing a stressful situation herself, noticed that repeated, back and forth eye movement relieved her anxiety. Shapiro studied the phenomenon scientifically, and two years later published her findings in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. EMDR is now accepted as a highly effective therapy for treating PTSD and a number of other conditions, including panic attacks, phobias, addictions, and performance anxiety.

The EMDR technique is intriguing. Turino explained that once a counselor and client have developed a comfortable rapport, the client focuses on a disturbing aspect of the traumatic incident. The counselor and client talk briefly about the negative beliefs, feelings, and physical sensations associated with the disturbing experience. During the session, using a board that shows lights blinking alternately on the left and the right, the patient's eyes follow the flashing lights back and forth. Turino says that dramatic reduction in traumatic memories can usually be achieved in three to twelve sessions. For some patients, using alternating sounds or tapping can produce the same results as back and forth eye movements.

Turino further explained that when someone experiences a highly traumatic event, the brain does not process the information as it normally does. It is as though the incident becomes frozen in time within the brain, causing it to be relived later, as if there were still a threat in the present. She compared EMDR to "breaking a log jam in a river." The bad memory becomes unfrozen and information again flows freely within the brain, which is finally able to properly process the traumatic event. "After EMDR, the person still remembers the incident, but is able to put it in the past and deal with it objectively," she said.

The negative emotions associated with traumatic memories are often more deep-seated than the initial incident itself. EMDR and the counseling that goes with it are able to get to the root causes, according to Turino. She recalled a woman who came to her because she was too terrified to drive a car after being in a bad traffic accident. After a single EMDR session the woman was able to drive again, but in Turino's words, "She was still whiteknuckling it." In the second session they discovered the real cause of the woman's distress. She realized that she had been feeling tremendous guilt over not being able to help the victim in the other car involved in the accident. EMDR helped her recognize and process that information and she was then able to go back to normal driving, no longer reliving the accident.

Turino also used EMDR to help a woman who was near The World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and who constantly relived the horror of that day every time she saw a photograph of it. Victims of childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse have also benefitted from Turino's use of EMDR therapy.

"EMDR is a breakthrough in understanding the biological and physiological underpinnings of trauma and why we can't 'strong arm' ourselves out of our traumatic response to our experience. Now we understand the limits of talk therapy, in that when an event is perceived as traumatic, it overwhelms the information processing system, locking the impression into the nervous system. Targeting the disturbing event with eye movement releases the nervous system from perpetual activation, so that the event can be known from the safety of the present. EMDR 'resets' the information processing system so that the brain's natural abilities to heal are no longer blocked," Turino added.

EMDR is "not a panacea," according to Turino. When patients suffer from multiple psychological disorders, or if they have experienced several traumatic events, solutions can become more complicated and difficult.

Turino will give a talk on EMDR and PTSD at the Desmond Fish Library in Garrison on Thursday, January 21 at 7pm. Admission is free. Local veterans and their family members who would like to learn more about the "Give an Hour" program and EMDR therapy can call Hope Turino at her Cold Spring office at 265 0600. Information about the program is also available at: giveanhour.org

EMDR is recognized by the US Department of Defense, US Dept. of Veterans' Affairs, American Psychiatric Association, and the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies as an effective treatment for PTSD. Michael Turton