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Eye movement therapy promises relief for trauma victims

BY NANCY KESSLER • MARCH 12, 2010

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Recovering from a trauma can be marred by flashbacks, placing the victim right back amid the pain and fear.

A nontraditional therapy where patients follow a moving light with their eyes or alternately tap their knees while focusing on the experience could help.

A controversial therapy called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR, was developed in 1987 by psychologist Dr. Francine Shapiro of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, Calif. By stimulating both sides of the brain through eye movement while examining a traumatic event, Shapiro found that victims can create new associations between the memory and more realistic information — in effect teaching the brain a better response.

"We don't know exactly why it works," said Kate Weiss, a licensed clinical professional counselor in Livingston, who often uses EMDR in her treatments. "It may be because the client is integrating their thinking, feeling and sensing responses in the brain."

EMDR has been recommended for post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, such as panic attacks, eating disorders, addictions, phobias and performance anxiety. It has been used to treat people after serious accidents, death of loved ones, sexual assaults, childhood abuse or military combat to name a few.

Weiss explained the brain has three parts — the frontal for rational thought and intelligence, the limbic for regulating emotions and nonverbal systems and the reptilian for controlling involuntary actions like breathing and heartbeat.

"In a traumatic event, the reaction in the limbic is not connected to the frontal," Weiss said. "The memory is not processed normally but remains isolated. When that memory is triggered, it creates a response similar to the original incident."

"Since trauma is stored in the limbic, when you think of it, you don't get a narrative, you get a bodily and emotional experience," said Nancy Errebo, doctor of psychology and a certified EMDR instructor in Missoula who trained with Shapiro. EMDR overcomes that inappropriate reaction by linking the negative associations with positive resources, reasoning and knowledge," she added.

The patient is stimulated externally by watching a light bar move from side to side, listening to tones alternating in the ears or tapping on opposite knees.

"I can adjust the speed and intensity," Weiss said. "I let the clients pick so they can let it fall into the background. It's still bilateral. With young children, they can stamp opposite feet, pass a stuffed animal between their hands or sit on their parent's lap and tap."

EMDR and post-traumatic stress disorder

Nancy Errebo, doctor of psychology and a certified EMDR instructor in Missoula, has had success with EMDR treating war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder at Veterans Hospitals in Montana and Arizona. "EMDR is one of the most effective ways to deal with PTSD," she said. In fact, in 2004, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense recommended using EMDR for treatment of PTSD. Since war veterans usually have more severe trauma than civilians, EMDR therapy often takes longer — as many as 12 sessions — to achieve success, Errebo said. On the other hand, Weiss has had clients who required only one to three sessions of EMDR to achieve results.

For more about EMDR therapy

For more information, or to find an EMDR therapist, visit www.emdr.com or www.emdria.org.

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At the same time, the patient is guided to focus internally on some aspect of the trauma for brief periods — what they are seeing, what they're feeling in their body and what they're feeling emotionally. The patient then examines new associations that arise, and those new associations are focused on in following sets, repeating the process several times during a therapy session.

"We know eye movements produce de-arousal and compete with stress," Errebo said. Such a state might keep the patient's neurological system active long enough to complete the work of integrating the memory in a healthy manner. EMDR also might "re-orient" people's perspective on information that keeps looping around and around the same way, she said.

"Or, the dual awareness, having to pay attention to external stimulation and their inner state helps remind them they are in the present and the trauma is in the past," Errebo said.

Some performing artists and athletes have used EMDR "looking forward" to install an image of doing their work well or to create a calm focus, Weiss added.

Still, it is used mainly for psychotherapy. "Anybody who has traumatic memories will benefit from EMDR," Errebo said. "Otherwise, those memories can cause a lot of problems in life."

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