

## **Stress Relief Benefits from Reprocessing Bad Memories**

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Jane discovered her fiancé in another woman's bed. The night of this confrontation - and the tumultuous end of their engagement - haunted her for years after the incident. Flashbacks of the "discovery" scene induced the same spell of nausea and vomiting that occurred on that fateful night. Simply hearing his name provoked hours of crying. Her desire to meet another man was thwarted by this spiral of emotional reactions, and by the time she came for treatment, Jane's dream of another romance had vanished.

To help Jane with her traumatic memories, I embarked on an alternative therapy technique, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Dr. Francine Shapiro, the originator of EMDR, delineates eight critical steps of this evidence-based psychotherapy. I had progressed to the Desensitization phase, and was preparing Jane to confront the memory.

"Recall the image of the trauma", I instructed. "Hold the thoughts and emotions of what you experienced. "

Jane reflected: "I feel nausea in the pit to my stomach. I'm inferior to this other woman. It's my fault, so I must never love again'.

I continued to purposely activate her disturbing beliefs and feelings.

"Focus on the feelings of hurt, anger and sadness. Feel the nausea in the pit of your stomach."

When Jane's thoughts and feelings were clearly in mind, I asked her to follow an unorthodox procedure.

"Now Jane, follow my fingers with your eyes".

Jane tracked my fingers to the left and right, and within ten bilateral movements, she began breathing rapidly and sobbing. (Patients undergoing this procedure will often experience an intense emotional and body reaction during the first movements).

"You're going to be fine Jane. Stay with me," I encouraged her as I kept my

fingers moving from side to side.

The images of her ex fiancé and the strong feelings attached to him faded step by step with each set of eye movements, and a deep state of relaxation followed. We continued this way with each traumatic image associated with the "discovery" scene and the breakup.

Within three ninety minute EMDR sessions, the catastrophic scenes had faded, and Jane had difficulty remembering the knot in the pit of her stomach. Her daily diary of feelings showed that the "spells" had disappeared, and were not triggered when she completed a difficult therapy assignment; that is, to confront her ex to demand payment of a loan.

EMDR sessions include the installation of Positive Self-Statements that are visualized, repeated and reinforced with eye movements. We had worked together to strengthen rational thoughts, and by the time Jane was discharged, she ardently believed... "It's behind me now, all in the past. I'm adequate and worthwhile. I will love again."

**Traumatic Memories.** A Century ago, Freud proposed that traumatic memories lurked in the unconscious mind, pulsating in this underground inferno to disrupt our thoughts, feelings and actions. Since then, scientists and practitioners have worked relentlessly to understand the function of what Neuroscientists call "encoded data": Do bad memories affect our everyday lives? Can we tap into them to help alleviate human suffering?

My renewed interest in "memory work" emerged when I read about a Psychologist who used rapid eye movements to extinguish traumatic memories. I may have dismissed this new therapy as unscientific, but Dr. Shapiro was a Behaviorist in the tradition of the most prominent scientists of the past such as Pavlov, Watson and B.F. Skinner. Why was this respected Behavioral Psychologist waving her fingers before a patient's eyes? I decided to find out for myself.

Dr. Francine Shapiro is a gifted teacher and thinker. She started our training session with a riveting account of her discovery. The Psychologist was taking a walk in the park and worrying about a significant stressor in her life. She noticed that her eyes were moving rapidly, side to side. When she returned to the anxiety-ridden thoughts, they had diminished in some mysterious way. A pivotal question emerged from this

experience: Is there a connection between spontaneous eye movements and the extinction of emotional distress? Did some natural, neurological event eliminate her worries?

As a behavioral scientist, she was compelled to put her clinical intuition to a test. Shapiro embarked on a program to treat Vietnam Veterans who – after decades -continued to be traumatized by their war experiences. The immense success of de-traumatizing war victims launched further work with eye movement therapy, and a revolution in the field of mental health treatment.

For more than two decades, Shapiro has experimented with this exciting finding, and developed it into the most rapidly expanding therapy in the history of mental health. Thousands of clinicians have completed EMDR training and the technique is being tested by controlled studies in labs and universities throughout the world. Presently, EMDR is considered a scientifically validated procedure for the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In addition, successful outcomes are documented for the treatment of other psychiatric disorders, mental health problems and somatic symptoms.

Clinicians are reporting positive outcomes, and the technique is now being applied to symptoms such as chronic pain, anxiety and panic disorders, as well as grief reactions. The treatment procedure is also successful with traumatized children. An admirable feature of Shapiro's approach is clearly evident in her training sessions: No claims will be made for EMDR's success without scientific research to back them up.

**Reprocessing Bad Memories.** To gain a basic understanding of what happens during EMDR, consider this scenario: A child is surrounded by the security of his home environment. Suddenly, the serenity is shattered by the frightening sounds of mom and dad fighting. The child's two heroes, the only dependable sources of security in his life, are having a knock-down-drag-out. This scares and overwhelms the child, and his reflexive emotional reactions are fear and anxiety. His heart pounds and breathing is rapid. He wants to flee, to retreat to a safe place, but there is nowhere to hide.

Luckily, the fighting subsides and mom and dad approach their child to soothe his frazzled nerves: "It's just a little disagreement honey. Everything is okay." This nurturing is helpful, and for the moment, he can let go of the trauma. But the brain has an important job to do: It stores this fear-provoking experience in a memory network that's coded "dangerous altercations".

Imagine the multitude of times this danger signal becomes activated in childhood. After years of labeling, storing and coping with stress, our brains have developed

numerous networks of memories to remind, prepare and protect us from future threats. And there are billions of brain cells devoted to this task.

As adults, relationship conflict may trigger the activation of this same neural network and avoidance/flight becomes the norm. The distinction between past and present threat is blurred. As far as our brains are concerned, we are still in danger and escape may be our only mode of survival.

In a case of chronic conflict avoidance, an EMDR therapist encourages the individual to call up and hold the threatening memory while focusing on a compelling stimulus (a finger moving rapidly in front of his/her eyes)? The dual task – paying attention and calling up a memory – is inherently difficult for the brain. And, when memory and focused attention occur together, one seems to attenuate the other. This neural pathway to therapeutic success is one of several theories that are currently being investigated to help explain the rapid success of eye movement therapy.

A dual attention task like eye movements, when used by a qualified clinician as part of a comprehensive, eight step treatment plan, speeds up the process of change. Every facet of therapy is accelerated: insight into problems, connecting past to present, the release of powerful emotions, relaxation and behavior change.

The eye movements (and other comparable dual attention maneuvers developed by Shapiro) have a way of breaking into the neural network of the brain that holds dysfunctional memories. Once the clinician breaks into the network, the data spring to life. And when this "release" takes place, resolution is not far behind. According to Shapiro, the memory has been successfully reprocessed.

**The Eyes as Healers.** Could rapid eye movements be the neurological 'keys' that unlock the unconscious mind? Is mental health treatment on the brink of a major revolution, a gigantic leap in the way we think about the brain's ability to heal? It's too early to answer these questions with a resounding "yes". The excitement builds with each clinician trained, each treatment success and research study completed. A brilliant woman with years of clinical experience took a simple walk in the park and reflected on her 'self'. The science and practice of psychotherapy has profited immeasurably from what she discovered.

