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POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER Factsheet

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What is eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)?

EMDR is based on the observation that the intensity of traumatic memories can be reduced through eye movements. While the patient focusses on a traumatic memory or thought, he or she simultaneously moves his or her eyes back and forth, following the movement of the therapist's finger. The exact mechanisms through which EMDR works are not clear, although it is proposed that when a traumatic memory is activated in working memory, and at the same time the patient focusses on the movement of the fingers, the vividness and intensity of the memory are reduced. This diluted memory is stored in the long-term memory, leading to a less emotional reaction at future activation.

What is the evidence for EMDR for PTSD?

Moderate quality evidence found a large effect of improved PTSD and depression symptoms with EMDR compared to inactive controls, particularly when compared to waitlist/no treatment than when compared to usual care or relaxation. The effect for PTSD symptoms was medium-sized at the 3-month follow-up.

There was also a small effect of improved PTSD symptoms, but not depression symptoms, with EMDR compared to active controls (e.g., CBT or exposure therapy). The effect for PTSD symptoms was large at the 3-month follow-up and small at the 6-month follow-up. However, the effects were largest in studies with researcher allegiance to EMDR (with an hypothesis that EMDR would be more effective than the active comparator) and in studies with a high risk of bias.

Moderate to low quality evidence found a large effect of reduced PTSD symptom severity compared to waitlist/no treatment following EMDR in children and adolescents. At 1-4 months follow-up, the effect was not maintained in children.

Moderate to low quality evidence found EMDR improved PTSD symptoms when compared to standard care/waitlist (large effect) and when compared to non-specific therapies (small to medium-sized effect) in people with complex PTSD. EMDR may also improve the complex symptoms of negative self-concept and disturbances in relationships.



NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia) is one of the largest independent medical and clinical research institutes in Australia and an international leader in neurological research.

Diseases of the brain and nervous system pose the greatest health, economic and social burden of any disease group because they are chronic, debilitating and have no known cures.

Medical research is the cornerstone of efforts to advance the health and wellbeing of families and the community. Our dedicated scientists are focussed on transforming their research into significant and practical benefits for all patients.

While we hope you find this information useful, it is always important to discuss any questions about PTSD and its treatment with your doctor or other health care provider.

For more information see the technical table

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS

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