

Considering EMDR Therapy? What to Expect



Medically reviewed by [Bethany Juby, PsyD](#) — By Ana Gotter and [Crystal Raypole](#) — Updated on February 14, 2023

[Effectiveness](#) [Benefits](#) [How it works](#) [Considerations](#) [Bottom line](#)

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy may help reduce symptoms of trauma, particularly for people with post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is EMDR therapy?

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) refers to an interactive psychotherapy technique used to relieve psychological stress.

According to the theory behind the approach, [traumatic](#) and painful memories can cause post-traumatic stress when you don't process them completely. Then, when sights, sounds, words, or smells trigger those unprocessed memories, you re-experience them.

This re-experiencing leads to the emotional distress and other symptoms recognized as [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

EMDR aims to reduce symptoms of trauma by changing how your memories are stored in your brain. In a nutshell, an EMDR therapist does this by leading you through a series of bilateral (side-to-side) eye movements as you recall traumatic or triggering experiences in small segments, until those memories no longer cause distress.

While originally developed to treat trauma and PTSD, EMDR may also help relieve symptoms of other mental health concerns, especially those



intertwined with past trauma.

How effective is EMDR therapy?

You might feel a little skeptical of the idea that making eye movements when thinking about a traumatic experience can somehow help ease painful memories.

While experts aren't entirely certain exactly why the approach works, [some believe](#) it's effective because recalling distressing events may feel less emotionally upsetting when you aren't giving those memories your full attention.

To put it another way, the bilateral stimulation (BLS) used in EMDR gives you something to focus on as you access painful memories and unwanted thoughts.

This helps dim the intensity of your memory, allowing you space to process it without an overwhelming psychological response.

What the research says

Since the introduction of EMDR in 1987, a number of studies have found support for its effectiveness.

A [2014 review of 24 studies](#)  suggested EMDR:

- can help relieve emotional distress after adverse experiences
- may work more quickly and effectively than trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- may help ease somatic symptoms, like pain or muscle tension

Research findings have led the American Psychological Association to [conditionally recommend](#) EMDR for the treatment of PTSD. A conditional recommendation means that, while



research suggests positive treatment outcomes, there's not yet enough evidence to recommend it to everyone across the board.

The Department of Veterans Affairs also [recommends](#) EMDR as one primary option for treating PTSD.

Here's a closer look at what research has to say about EMDR's effectiveness:

- **For depression.** A [2015 study](#) ✓ of 32 people receiving inpatient care for [depression](#) found that EMDR therapy showed promise as a treatment: 68 percent of those receiving EMDR showed full remission after treatment. After EMDR, they noted more improvements in depression symptoms overall, plus fewer relapses and depression-related concerns at follow-up over a year later.
- **For children.** A [2012 summary of research studies](#) suggested EMDR may have benefit for treating a single instance of trauma in children. While EMDR also shows promise as a treatment for repeated trauma, like [abuse](#), experts agree on the need for more research.
- **For panic disorder.** A [2017 study](#) involving 84 people with [panic disorder](#) suggested EMDR is just as effective at treating panic disorder symptoms as [CBT](#).
- **After a stressful event requiring ER treatment.** A [2018 study](#) ✓ found that a single 1-hour session of EMDR appeared to help prevent post concussion-like symptoms in patients who received emergency room care after a stressful event.
- **For refugees with PTSD.** A [small 2018 study](#) ✓ explored the benefits of EMDR for Syrian refugees with PTSD. Of the 18 participants who received EMDR in a group therapy intervention, just over 61 percent no longer met criteria for a PTSD diagnosis afterward. Those who received EMDR also reported fewer symptoms of depression.
- **For psychosis.** According to a [2020 review](#) ✓ of six studies, EMDR may help treat [psychosis](#) with no adverse effects. In all six studies,

EMDR helped decrease delusions and negative symptoms, and participants reported less use of medication and mental health services. Some participants also noticed a decrease in [hallucinations](#) and [paranoia](#). The review authors noted the need for larger trials to support these benefits.

Which conditions can EMDR therapy treat?

EMDR is generally recommended for people living with overwhelming traumatic memories and symptoms of [PTSD](#). You may find it particularly helpful if you have a hard time sharing the trauma you've experienced with others, including therapists.

To date, limited evidence supports the effectiveness of EMDR for other mental health conditions, but some mental health professionals may also recommend it to treat:

- [depression](#)
- [anxiety](#)
- [panic attacks](#)
- [eating disorders](#)
- [substance use disorders](#)

A [2017 systematic review](#) [✓] of existing research suggested EMDR could potentially have benefit for people who have a history of trauma along with certain conditions, including:

- [bipolar disorder](#)
- [depression](#)
- [psychosis](#)
- [anxiety disorders](#)
- [substance use disorders](#)
- [low back pain](#)

For the most part, EMDR appears to be a safe intervention for a range of mental health symptoms, but future research may offer more conclusive support for its effectiveness.

How does EMDR therapy work?

EMDR therapy is broken down into eight phases, so you'll need to attend multiple sessions. Treatment usually consists of anywhere from 6 to 12 sessions, but more sessions may be needed

Phase 1: History and treatment planning

Your therapist will first review your symptoms and health history to get a better understanding of where you are in the treatment process.

This evaluation phase also includes briefly talking about your trauma and identifying potential memories to address.

Phase 2: Preparation

Your therapist will teach you a few different techniques to help manage and cope with the emotional or psychological stress you're experiencing, or uncomfortable feelings that might come up during treatment. This is called resourcing.

For example, you might learn stress management techniques, including [deep breathing](#) and [mindfulness exercises](#).

Phase 3: Assessment

During the third phase of EMDR treatment, your therapist will guide you through the process of selecting a specific memory to target, along with any relevant aspects of that memory, such as:

- [painful emotions](#) or physical sensations
- [intrusive thoughts](#) or images
- [distressing or unwanted self-beliefs](#)

Phases 4–7: Treatment

Your therapist will then begin using EMDR therapy techniques to address the targeted memories. This happens in four stages:

- **Desensitization.** You'll focus on that negative thought, memory, or image. At the same time, you'll be guided through bilateral stimulation (BLS), which might involve making specific eye movements, tapping, audio tones, or blinking lights. Then, you'll let your mind go blank and notice any thoughts and feelings that come up spontaneously. After you identify these thoughts, your therapist may have you refocus on that traumatic memory or move on to another, if that memory no longer triggers unwanted emotions.
- **Installation.** You'll "install" a positive self-belief or image to replace the unwanted one you identified in phase 3. You'll focus on this belief through another repetition of BLS.
- **Body scan.** Your therapist will ask if the targeted memory prompts any uncomfortable physical pain or sensations. If it does, they'll lead you through another repetition of BLS.
- **Closure.** After each session, your therapist will explore your progress and suggest relaxation techniques and other coping strategies that can help you maintain improvements.

Phase 8: Re-evaluation

During the re-evaluation phase, which begins the next session, your therapist will ask about the memories and feelings you addressed in the previous session.

If those memories still cause distress, they might continue targeting them. If not, they'll likely suggest moving on to new targets.

What to know before trying EMDR therapy

While experts generally recognize EMDR as a safe and effective approach with few unwanted effects, you could potentially experience a few side

effects, including:

- [vivid, realistic dreams](#)
- heightened sensitivity to physical sensations or emotions
- lightheadedness

EMDR can also take several sessions to work, though you could notice some improvement after your first session.

You might find the beginning of therapy triggers some emotional distress and discomfort, especially if you're just starting to deal with traumatic events.

But since EMDR doesn't require you to talk about the trauma at length or spend extensive time thinking about it, it may feel less overwhelming than other approaches used to treat trauma.

If you do become distressed during treatment, your therapist will help you return to the present before shifting to another traumatic memory. Remember, too, that you'll also learn [relaxation](#) and mindfulness strategies before you get started, and these techniques can help you [manage those unwanted emotions](#).

Finding a therapist

Ready to try EMDR? Keeping the following tips in mind can help you find the right professional.

Look for an EMDR-trained clinician

Therapists who want to offer EMDR can complete an [approved training](#) to become EMDR trained clinicians. This is not the same as the EMDR certification, which requires further education and training. Still, EMDR trained clinicians are fully qualified to offer EMDR.

Remember, it's not at all rude to ask potential therapists about the training they've completed before deciding to work with them.

To start your search for an EMDR-trained therapist, visit:

- [EMDR Institute](#)
- [EMDR International Association](#)

You can also find therapists offering EMDR in general therapist directories.

[Get more tips on finding the right therapist.](#)

Find a therapist who treats your specific symptoms

Plenty of therapists who offer EMDR specialize in treating trauma-related mental health symptoms, but some may choose to work only with people experiencing PTSD.

If you'd like to try EMDR for another mental health concern, such as panic disorder or symptoms of psychosis, it's always worth asking potential therapists what experience they have treating that concern.

If they don't have experience treating your symptoms, they might even be able to recommend a therapist who's a better fit.

Don't discount online therapy

If you prefer to connect with a therapist online but want to try EMDR, know that emerging research suggests it may still be effective in a teletherapy format.

A [2021 study](#) surveyed 33 EMDR therapists who gave data on 93 adult, children, and young adult therapy clients receiving EMDR online. According to the results, EMDR provided over the internet still helped relieve mental health symptoms.

The bottom line

By and large, experts consider EMDR therapy a useful approach for treating trauma and PTSD symptoms. EMDR may be particularly helpful



when treatments, like [talk therapy](#) and [medication](#), prove less than effective or lead to unwanted side effects.

SUBSCRIBE



Explore online talk therapy options

Great for a large network of licensed therapists

- \$60 to \$90/week, billed every 4 weeks
- Therapy via messaging, phone, or live video chat
- Flexible cancellation at any time

20% off your first month

[LEARN MORE](#)

Great for online medication delivery

- \$49 to \$85/month, billed monthly
- Unlimited check-ins via online messaging
- FDA-approved medication for anxiety and depression available

70% off your first month

[LEARN MORE](#)

Great for cognitive behavioral therapy

- \$40 to \$88/week, billed monthly
- Therapy via messaging, live video chat, and worksheets
- Multi-faceted program includes videos, journaling, and yoga

[LEARN MORE](#)



Get 20% off your first month

Great for additional
psychiatry services

- \$69 to \$129/week. with

Last medically reviewed on January 11, 2022

How we reviewed this article:

 SOURCES  HISTORY

Our experts continually monitor the health and wellness space, and we update our articles when new information becomes available.

Current Version

Feb 14, 2023

Written By

Ana Gotter, Crystal Raypole

Edited By

Kelly Morrell

Copy Edited By

Jen Anderson

Jan 11, 2022

Medically Reviewed By

Bethany Juby, PsyD

[VIEW ALL HISTORY](#) +

Share this article

