



What About TRAUMA?

EMDR Therapy and How it Can Help

■ by Lynne Scherschel, MS, LMFT

Anyone who has experienced trauma, whether combat trauma, a serious accident, assault, abuse, witnessed threat or violence against another, knows the often-debilitating power of post-traumatic stress to disrupt marriages, families, work, and life in general. This may be experienced as reliving the event, disturbing dreams, avoiding reminders of the event, fear/anxiety, intrusive thoughts/memories, a sense of dread, difficulty concentrating, and/or stress in relationships. Depending on the degree of trauma, these symptoms may be destructive in many, if not all, areas of one's life. They can also trigger a spiritual crisis, depending on what the person concluded about himself and God during and after the trauma.

Thankfully, by God's grace, a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was developed over 30 years ago. It's called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). It has been widely researched by the Veterans Administration and civilian researchers and shown to be one of the most successful treatments for PTSD for both veterans and civilians. There is research supporting its use in helping people with a variety of other issues, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), grief, domestic violence, and others. The good news is that the effects of trauma can be healed, and suffering can be decreased/eliminated, which can foster healing for the individual and their relationships, including with themselves and with God.

What is EMDR?

The theory behind EMDR is that when trauma occurs, it is encapsulated in the brain in all of its sensory elements: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and thoughts. This is why when a person has a flashback, they experience all of these stimuli and think they are really back in the traumatic situation or why any one of these sensory elements can trigger a memory or flashback. Usually, over a period of time, the parts of the brain where these elements are stored are slowly untangled and reprocessed, rendering them much less impactful and debilitating. When that doesn't happen, the symptoms described above continue and may even become more problematic, especially when the person finds the effects so overwhelming that they become suicidal, violent, or use drugs or alcohol to cope. When reprocessing does not occur spontaneously, EMDR can be used to facilitate the unpacking and reprocessing.

For this therapy to be effective and safe for the client, it must be directed by a trained EMDR therapist, preferably one who has completed both levels of training. After assessing the client to be sure they are a good candidate for EMDR therapy and some preparation and safety mechanisms are in place, the reprocessing can begin. This involves bilateral (alternating sides of the body) stimulation, such as the client watching the therapist's fingers, an object, or light moving back and forth. Bilateral tapping or bilateral sound may also be used and involves tapping or sound on alternating sides. The client's main responsibility is to intermittently report what they are noticing.

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What Are the Results?

As a Level-II-trained EMDR therapist who has worked with adult survivors of trauma for most of my 30-plus years as a clinician, I find EMDR especially helpful over other therapies because the client is in control, and it allows the reprocessing with significantly less retraumatization of the client. Some have described the process as watching the events from a fast-moving train without the need to stay there.

While working with clients, I have been amazed to watch the Holy Spirit at work as He guides the client to new understandings, to changes in the way they think about themselves and God relative to the trauma, and to the ability to forgive those involved – including themselves. They are then able to focus on the life, career, family, and ministry God had ordained for them. The memories remain but without the pain previously produced, sometimes for years. After therapy was completed, one of my clients said, “It was as though the trauma event had been projected on a rolled-down window shade, which was now simply rolled up.” At times like that, I am awed by the way God has created the human brain and the amazing ways He heals it through EMDR!

For more information on EMDR, go to the website for the EMDR International Association: www.emdria.org ■



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