

Experiencing Performance Issues? EMDR Therapy Can Help

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By Kristi Tackett-Newburg, M.A., LIMHP, CPC

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a scientifically based form of psychotherapy originally developed to treat trauma associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. Since its advent approximately 25 years ago, practitioners around the world have successfully used EMDR to treat all forms of trauma along with many other conditions including:



- Phobias
- Panic attacks
- Dissociative disorders
- Grief
- Disturbing memories
- Body dysmorphic disorders
- Pain disorders
- Stress

How EMDR Works

When a person experiences a disturbing event, their brain is often unable to process information surrounding that event in the way that it normally would. As that moment becomes “frozen in time” the person may feel as though they are reliving that event with the original sounds, images, smells, and body sensations. This can have a lasting negative effect on a person shaping how they view themselves, other people, and even the world.

EMDR therapy works by accessing specific parts of a memory (images, cognitions, emotions, and body sensations) and uses bilateral stimulation (e.g., eye movements, auditory, or tactile stimulation) to decrease any disturbances that are attached to the memory. During this process, the bilateral stimulation allows the brain to clear any mental blocks that are preventing the person from accurately processing a disturbing event from the past. Once the memory is fully reprocessed, it is filed away appropriately leaving no disturbance attached to the memory whenever it is recalled.

EMDR for Performance Enhancement

Perhaps one of the most innovative uses of EMDR therapy has been in treating performance related issues. EMDR uses the same process to help decrease stress and anxiety surrounding work, school or other types of performance. Examples of performance related issues may include:

- Test anxiety
- Fears surrounding public speaking, interviews, and presentations

- Anticipatory anxiety
- Inconsistent performance
- Poor stress management skills
- Recovery from sports injuries

Perhaps one of the most debilitating sports related performance issues is referred to as the “yips.” The “yips” is a condition said to affect between 32-47% of serious golfers. For reasons unknown, skilled athletes (namely golfers and baseball players) will suddenly encounter a mental hurdle that interferes with their ability to perform easy automatic tasks on the field or golf course. For example, pro golfers may suddenly be unable to drive the ball straight or baseball catchers are unable to throw the ball back to the pitcher.

It is easy to see how this condition would be very distressing to a seasoned athlete who is suddenly unable to perform even simple mundane tasks. Not surprisingly, this often leads to anger, frustration, anxiety, and even depression. The athlete may begin to develop negative core beliefs such as “I am a failure”, “There is something wrong with me”, or “I will never succeed.” These types of negative beliefs only exacerbate the condition reinforcing the impediment.

In treating athletes afflicted with the “yips”, I have found that these performance blocks almost always trace back to past traumatic experiences or old sports-related injuries. As such, EMDR has proven to be a very effective treatment for this debilitating condition. Using the same technique, the client reprocesses the event letting go of negative imagery, emotions, and body sensations that are attached to their performance issues. Any mental blocks that are interfering with performance are removed allowing the client to tap into their strengths. This leaves the athlete feeling more empowered and confident in achieving their goals.

What You Can Expect from Treatment

EMDR treatment consist of 8 phases:

1. Therapist gathers the client’s history and begins developing a treatment plan. This is a collaborative process involving both the therapist and client. This phase includes a discussion of the presenting problem and any symptoms related to that problem.
2. Therapist begins to prepare the client for the EMDR process by explaining the theory and practice behind the treatment. Relaxation techniques are developed and enhanced using any form of bilateral stimulation. These techniques are used at the end of every processing session to ensure the client is calm and free from any disturbances.
3. Once the client identifies specific targets for EMDR, therapist guides the client in identifying an image the represents the target event. Next, the therapist helps the client explore any negative beliefs, emotions, and body sensations that are attached to the triggering event. Therapist then assists the client in identifying a positive belief that can replace the negative cognition during the processing phase of treatment.
4. Once the processing session is “set up” therapist will ask the client to focus on the distressing image and negative cognition while using some form of bilateral stimulation (e.g., following a set of lights). This process continues until the memory no longer evokes any disturbance.
5. After the client has reprocessed any distressing events, positive beliefs are installed by having the client “hold together” the past event and the new positive cognition. Therapist repeats eye movements during this process.

6. The client is asked to perform a body scan to identify if any areas of stress, tension, or tightness associated with the original distressing memory remain. If any stress remains, therapist and client assess the nature of the tension and decide whether further processing is needed. If the client denies any tension, therapist will proceed to the closing phases.
7. At the end of every session, the client is debriefed to ensure they are in a better state of body and mind than when they arrived for the session. Therapist will remind client to use calming strategies in between sessions if needed.
8. All new sessions start with a re-evaluation and discussion of any new memories, thoughts, or experiences. If necessary, therapist and client will re-assess the treatment plan. Any new disturbances are reprocessed as needed.

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