

Don't Get Trapped By Trauma: Part 4

What we can do to restore equilibrium and get back to living life as we want to

So far in this series we've looked at how being trapped in a trauma can affect us (Part 1), what trauma is (Part 2) and the explanation for why we get trapped in trauma (Part 4). In this part we'll look at therapies which can release you from the dominance of trauma.

In order to recover we need to calm the system sufficiently to unscramble the emotional computer part of the brain so the AIP can get back online to do its job.

There is a lot of help out there. All therapeutic approaches are working toward helping to restore emotional equilibrium and well-being. However, there are several specialised treatments used to support recovery from the ongoing effects of trauma. These come under the umbrella of what's known as Trauma-Focussed Therapy (TFT). Some you can do by joining a class or going on-line to learn the techniques e.g. mindfulness, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). For others you will need to seek the support of a therapist who specialises in trauma. These include TFCBT (Trauma Focussed Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing), and Equine-Led Trauma-Focussed Therapy.

In this article we're going to focus on EMDR. To help you decide whether it could be a useful intervention for you we'll look at the underlying principles and goals of the treatment and how it works in practice.

The basic principles

EMDR is based on the premise that our health and well-being can be blocked when a traumatic experience becomes embedded or stuck i.e. when the AIP goes into overload, crashes and goes offline. The goal of EMDR is to get the AIP back online.

EMDR doesn't profess to eliminate the event, but rather to lessen its impact: to normalise and make sense of what's happened to make it more bearable so you can put it on a memory stick in your emotional library. You can get it out to look at when you want to without being overwhelmed and get on with life without experiencing unwelcome, uninvited thoughts, images and feelings or be triggered by similar situations in the present.

It's possible to use EMDR as a stand-alone treatment. However, it also sits well alongside other trauma-focussed interventions, making use of CBT resourcing-type techniques such as mindfulness, visualisation and relaxation.

How does it work?

During EMDR sessions you will remain in control, fully alert and wide awake. This is not a form of hypnosis and you can stop the process at any time.

EMDR uses a technique called ABLS (Alternate Bi-Lateral Stimulation) to reproduce the positive effects of REM (Rapid Eye Movement).

What do we mean by REM and why is it important in our path to recovering from trauma?

If you look at someone who is in the REM part of their sleep cycle, you'll notice their eyes flickering from side to side under their eyelids. This is the short, but deep part of sleep, during which the subconscious makes sense of information it hasn't been able to process during the day.

For instance, have you ever gone to bed worrying about something and in the morning when you wake up the problem isn't troubling you in the same way? This is an example of the REM doing its job to help process/make sense of what's happened and keep your AIP online.

During treatment the therapist uses ABLS to mimic the side to side eye movements of REM to disrupt/slow down the smoke detector sufficiently to let in the more thinking part of our brain, the fire investigator to help. Remember, this is the part of our AIP which can make sense of the upset and help us gradually to restore our emotional balance so we can function better. There are several ways of delivering ABLS including using finger movements, a light bar, tapping or audio stimulation. Between you and your therapist you will work out which works best for you.

At the start of treatment your therapist will ask you to start out by looking at the worst part of the trauma-related memory as it affects you today and the image that goes with it. You might feel it's counter intuitive to go back and think about something that causes such pain. However, in order to recover it's important to expose oneself to thinking about and imagining the traumatic event in order to gain release from its hold.

Your therapist will then use short sets of ABLS to enable you to look at the trauma memory in small chunks. They'll also ask you to let your mind go free and notice other spontaneous thoughts and feelings that come up. These may seem unrelated, but they are all relevant. Just enjoy the journey.

The treatment will continue until the memory no longer has the same negative resonance. This may take one or several sessions, depending upon the nature and severity of the trauma-related memory.

So, what are we saying overall about how trauma affects us and what we can do about it?

As we said at the beginning, being able to make sense of what's happening when you're experiencing the after effects of trauma and the neurological reasons behind why you can be so affected by it is the first and most important step toward recovery, because having knowledge, understanding and language to describe what is happening lifts us out of helplessness and empowers us to get what we need to restore our well-being.

So don't let trauma keep you a prisoner of your past. Free yourself to live life more fully in the present, unshackled by paralysing fear and anxieties and regain more control of your life and how you want to live it.