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Chapter 1

Trauma Is Real and EMDR Can Help

Trauma has become one of the many mental health catch phrases of the century. It is mentioned and talked about everywhere you look. Heightened awareness of this condition is a positive development, but it can also lead to confusion and misconceptions. What, actually, is trauma? And how do you know whether the term *trauma* applies to your own experience? It is rare in today's world for anyone to be able to evade experiencing some type of trauma within their lifetime. Whether you are trying to explore your own trauma or identify whether it's genuinely an aspect of your own experience, you can benefit from knowing how to handle traumatic or even merely stressful events in your life. Knowledge about EMDR treatment can help you find answers you're seeking.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR, is a treatment modality that is specifically designed to target and help heal trauma, but it can alleviate many other mental health concerns as well.

This chapter introduces you to how this book explores the term *trauma* and the different ways that trauma can show up in your life. The chapter also provides an overview of the implications of EMDR and how you can use it to reduce the impact of stressors and trauma on your well-being.

Trauma Is Everywhere

It seems as though trauma is inescapable today. If you take a look around, remnants of trauma seem to be everywhere. People see trauma through many different lenses and explain it in many different ways, however, and this multifaceted view of trauma can make understanding it on a deeper, more individual level challenging. It can be hard to determine whether trauma is something that has impacted you. Keep reading to explore what trauma really is.

Recognizing trauma in your life

When big, tragic examples of trauma are all around you in the media and in life, you might shy away from identifying your own experiences as traumatic. It's easy to compare your experience to those types of events and downplay the impact of your own life events.

Maybe you have associated trauma only with major negative life experiences, such as abuse or acts of violence, or believed it to be specific to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, trauma arises from many more conditions than just horrific, catastrophic events. Trauma can be an accumulation of different experiences that compound. Following are some attributes of trauma you may not be aware of:

- » Trauma can be big or small.
- » Trauma impacts everyone differently.
- » Trauma is more than a disorder.
- » Trauma is not just about the event you experience but also all the ways in which your body and mind are impacted.
- » Trauma doesn't always have a beginning, middle, or an end.
- » Trauma doesn't have to be a huge, catastrophic event; it can be a series of small injuries.

Gabor Maté, a well-known expert in the field of trauma, describes trauma in his book *The Myth of Normal* (2022) as being an automatic response and reaction to adverse experiences in life. He goes on to explain that trauma isn't just what happens *to* you, but also what happens *inside* you. Although this is just one way to think of trauma, it calls attention to the fact that trauma is more than just something we experience, but is something that also impacts how we feel and function internally. So as you are considering whether you have endured trauma, keep in mind that it is about the impact it has on you, both psychologically and physically.

Following is a helpful definition to consider when you are exploring trauma in your life:

Trauma is anything that negatively impacts yourself, others, or the world around you.

Think about this a little more deeply. Trauma can be anything that negatively impacts your view of yourself and your trust in yourself. Trauma also involves the loss of trust in others, and the perception of the world around you as threatening and dangerous. For now, just begin to consider some of the ways you feel negatively toward yourself, others, and the world around you. What do you find? Are these issues in your life that you would like to resolve or whose impact you'd like to reduce? If so, you are in the right place!

Taking back your life

After you identify and begin to learn more about the trauma in your life, finding hope is crucial. You need to know, right now, that you can take back your life and create the life that you want. Having the life you want is possible. Healing is available for you, even if you have never known a healthy, fulfilled life. Despite what traumatic or stressful things you have faced, it is never too late for you. It will take some work, as many good outcomes do. The work is messy, imperfect, and raw, but if you can embrace this aspect of your healing journey, you can take back your life.

Negative life experiences do not need to predetermine the rest of your life. You have already suffered enough. EMDR work isn't about reliving the difficult experiences you have endured, or merely acquiring some coping skills. It is about doing real, hard, vulnerable work. And if you choose to do so, you will rid yourself of the negative influences that these experiences have created and truly step into the life that you want. Keep in mind that if you have a tendency to avoid this vulnerable work, that, too, can be a trauma response.

How EMDR Can Be an Option for Treating Trauma

If you have struggled to find things that work for you along your road to healing, EMDR may be a solution for you. Not only is it known for its rapid effects, it is also one of the most researched and evidence-based treatment modalities that exists worldwide for treating trauma and other mental health issues, as

indicated by the originator of EMDR, Francine Shapiro, in a recent edition of her book *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing* (2019).

If you feel as though you run into the same issues over and over in your life, or can't seem to get past certain problematic beliefs and behaviors, you are not alone. These kinds of blocks are common for people who have experienced trauma, and traditional forms of talk therapy can't always do the trick of getting you back to living life the way you want. EMDR is different from traditional talk therapy.

So, what is EMDR?

Although the spelled-out version of EMDR — eye movement desensitization and reprocessing — is a mouthful and sounds like a long-winded, science-y term, EMDR is actually quite simple in its approach for you as the client.

Typically, the reference to eye movements throws people because it can make this modality sound weird, woo-woo, or hokey. But fear not: EMDR is based on neurobiology, with extensive research backing its therapeutic value. (You can find out more about the basis for EMDR in Chapter 6.) The purpose of EMDR is to get your brain functioning more adaptively, helping it to process and access memories and beliefs that are related to your past negative experiences and increase your ability to use more helpful, adaptive information within your brain.

Sometimes the effects of our traumatic experiences get stuck in a loop because the brain doesn't know what to do with them, which leads to negative beliefs about ourselves, heightened emotional and body responses, intrusive thoughts and memories, and other symptoms. These loops become our automatic responses when we're triggered, and we can get stuck in them (cue the panic attacks and nightmares!). Our brains and bodies think they need to be in this loop to keep us safe.

EMDR helps to break up this loop by disengaging the trauma-response associations your brain and body have made, increasing access to more adaptive thoughts, emotions, and self-beliefs. This process can result in finding resolution for your traumatic experiences. EMDR helps your nervous system to truly feel and believe that you are safe in the present and no longer in that traumatic experience.

The eye movement aspect refers to the use of bilateral stimulation, a nonintrusive, gentle approach that typically can involve sound or touch as well, to engage your brain in the same type of processing that it performs during your Rapid Eye Movement (REM) cycle of sleep. (I explain bilateral stimulation in detail in Chapter 6 and demonstrate its use throughout the subsequent chapters.)

REM sleep is the time when your brain does a lot of its processing, or making sense of information from what it has experienced throughout the day.

EMDR helps your brain to engage in this same process but in a conscious manner so that you can work through problematic, “stuck” beliefs and emotional patterns that your brain may not get to fully finish processing during REM sleep. You can find out more about REM sleep in Chapter 6.

EMDR and mental health

The mental health landscape continues to change and evolve, and knowing what therapeutic approach will be the most helpful to clients can be tricky. EMDR is known for its effectiveness in treating not only PTSD and trauma but also a variety of other mental health disorders. Research has demonstrated EMDR’s efficacy for a myriad of problems, including depression, anxiety, substance use, impulse-control disorders, and more.

How EMDR can help you

If you are desperate for answers and yearning for help and true, lasting healing, EMDR is where you should start. When bad things have happened in your life, their impact can disrupt the proper functioning of your brain, leaving you in a highly stressed and fearful state. You can become “stuck” in these experiences and their details, and unable to move past them. EMDR can help you move these negative memories, thoughts, and feelings from the forefront of your mind to a different part of your brain so that you can get back to living the life you want!

How EMDR differs from talk therapy

In contrast to many traditional forms of talk therapy, EMDR puts you in the driver’s seat of your treatment and helps you connect with your experience. You will experience what EMDR practitioners call a *free association* process, which is similar to some hypnosis theory. However, hypnosis involves going into a trance-like state but EMDR does not. You’re fully aware of what is taking place in EMDR.

EMDR helps you to make sense of thoughts and memories that were once confusing or negative and replace them with positive, more meaningful insights. The best part? You cannot do EMDR “wrong,” meaning that your skilled EMDR practitioner will guide you through your experiences in a way that works best and is individual to you, rather than making you follow a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach.

Not only does EMDR help you work through mental challenges and reduce the impact that trauma has on your emotions and thought processes, it also tends to improve your physical symptoms. People often report that they feel healthier,

stronger, and more energized after using EMDR as a treatment method. Besides helping your overall health improve, EMDR can reduce recurring cycles of thoughts and behaviors, and eliminate the need to talk through the intense, disturbing details of your life events. You may find a freedom that is unmatched by other forms of therapy you may have tried.

Lasting changes you can see

One of the most remarkable aspects of EMDR is its lasting effects for people who have used it in their healing. EMDR has been shown to improve a client's overall well-being in as little as a few sessions, with results lasting for months and sometimes years after treatment. Keep in mind that EMDR is not a quick-fix solution; it requires your commitment and full engagement to be successful. But if you fully invest in your treatment and work with a skilled EMDR practitioner, you stand a very good chance of finding satisfying results.

Many people report that they notice a reduction in triggers (*triggers* are explained in Chapter 3), more control over their thoughts, a better ability to manage and handle their emotions, and so many more improvements. As you begin your own EMDR journey, I challenge you to begin noticing the changes and improvements that you find in your day-to-day life. You may be truly amazed by the healing power of EMDR.

Working with a Skilled EMDR Practitioner

Finding the right practitioner along your healing journey is essential. You need a compassionate, highly trained EMDR companion who can walk with you throughout your process of healing. Keep in mind that the layperson and some variety of professionals in this field may not have specific training related to trauma or EMDR.

When wanting to use EMDR in your own therapeutic work, it is imperative that you consider the following:

» **Training:** Find out what the professional's experience and education are as related to trauma and, most important, their training related to EMDR. To be fully trained and able to utilize EMDR, practitioners must receive approximately five full days of training, including practice opportunities, ongoing consultation, and continued consultation to qualify for certification in EMDR.

» **Experience:** Find out what the professional's experience in using EMDR is and whether they use resourcing skills (you can literally ask this). If they do not know what resourcing skills are, you should look for another professional to work with because these are among the most important aspects of EMDR that lead to greater success within treatment.

If the practitioner you are looking to work with does not meet both of these requirements, you are better served to look elsewhere. EMDR is an advanced clinical skill that takes a lot of practice and ongoing education; it is not something that can simply be learned by reading a book or just watching videos, and it should never be done independently without the expertise of a trained professional.

