What is EMDR –

• Do you feel annoyed, angry or bored often?
• Do you isolate from others?
• Do you feel that you are not as good as others are?
• Do you have nightmares or have a hard time falling asleep or staying asleep?
• Do you have negative events that happened to you? Do you tend to keep things inside and not tell anyone?
• Do you use drugs or alcohol or do you do things to harm your body to numb or escape the uncomfortable feelings? Or do you do this to fit in because you don’t feel connected to others, or you don’t feel as good as others?

Well, believe it or not a lot of kids, teens and adults feel this way, and there is help for all of us!! There is a way to find hope and find our positive feelings again.

It is really cool that you are interested in finding ways that can help you get better. Let’s start by talking about what happens when we go through tough stuff in our lives:

When we have bad or negative events in our lives like abuse, bullying, divorce, accidents, losses and death of a loved one, violence in the home among others, the brain creates ‘files’ or “apps” that contain all the feelings, thoughts, and body sensations connected to this event. When we have events that are not ‘too bad’, the brain has the capacity to work on these files/apps before storing them and locking them up as memories. What is stored has been sorted out and organized so the negative stuff has been let go, allowing us to keep the good stuff and learn from this experience. However, when the event is really bad or has happened several times, these files/apps get overloaded and the brain can’t do the work of sorting things out and putting all the pieces of the event together. As a result, these files/apps are all messy, in pieces that are not put together and organized by the brain. Different life events we call triggers can open up these files/apps or “click” on them. A “click” may be a classmate making fun of us, being ignored, not getting what we are asking for, parents asking us to clean up our room and so on. When these “clicks” open up the files/apps, we start to have the negative feelings, thoughts, and body reactions we had when the bad stuff happened. EMDR helps the brain organize these files and put all the pieces together. When the files/apps are finally organized, the “clicks” of everyday life won’t have the power to make us feel angry, sad or shameful or to think that we are not worthy or that we are not enough or to make us yell, become aggressive or do things we regret later. EMDR is not a “magic” cure. It takes some work, but it is sooo worth it because recovering our ability to feel good is worth all of our efforts.

One of the many things that happen when we do EMDR is that we move our eyes from one side to the other while thinking about the negative or tough event. This is not new for your body; in fact you move your eyes every night from side to side when you are dreaming. This is called REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep cycle. EMDR therapists know how to use EMDR and will guide you and further explain all the stuff that happens when we do EMDR and what we know about it. Do not try to do this on your own, as it is NOT recommended.

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What is EMDR?

The mind can often heal itself naturally, in the same way as the body does. Much of this natural coping mechanism occurs during sleep, particularly during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Francine Shapiro developed Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) in 1987, utilizing this natural process in order to successfully treat Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Since then, EMDR has been used to effectively treat a wide range of mental health problems.
What happens when you are traumatized?

Most of the time your body routinely manages new information and experiences without you being aware of it. However, when something out of the ordinary occurs and you are traumatized by an overwhelming event (e.g. a car accident) or by being repeatedly subjected to distress (e.g. childhood neglect), your natural coping mechanism can become overloaded. This overloading can result in disturbing experiences remaining frozen in your brain or being "unprocessed". Such unprocessed memories and feelings are stored in the limbic system of your brain in a "raw" and emotional form, rather than in a verbal "story" mode. This limbic system maintains traumatic memories in an isolated memory network that is associated with emotions and physical sensations, and which are disconnected from the brain's cortex where we use language to store memories. The limbic system's traumatic memories can be continually triggered when you experience events similar to the difficult experiences you have been through. Often the memory itself is long forgotten, but the painful feelings such as anxiety, panic, anger or despair are continually triggered in the present. Your ability to live in the present and learn from new experiences can therefore become inhibited. EMDR helps create the connections between your brain's memory networks, enabling your brain to process the traumatic memory in a very natural way.

What is an EMDR session like?

EMDR utilizes the natural healing ability of your body. After a thorough assessment, you will be asked specific questions about a particular disturbing memory. Eye movements, similar to those during REM sleep, will be recreated simply by asking you to watch the therapist's finger moving backwards and forwards across your visual field. Sometimes, a tapping, vibrations or headphones are used instead. The eye movements will last for a short while and then stop. You will then be asked to report back on the experiences you have had during each of these sets of eye movements. Experiences during a session may include changes in thoughts, images and feelings.

With repeated sets of eye movements, the memory tends to change in such a way that it loses its painful intensity and simply becomes a neutral memory of an event in the past. Other associated memories may also heal at the same time. This linking of related memories can lead to a dramatic and rapid improvement in many aspects of your life.

What can EMDR be used for?

In addition to its use for the treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, EMDR has been successfully used to treat:

- anxiety and panic attacks
- stress
- sleep problems
- addictions
- self-esteem and performance anxiety
- depression
- phobias
- complicated grief
- pain relief, phantom limb pain

Will I will remain in control and empowered?

During EMDR treatment, 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. Throughout the session, the therapist will support and facilitate your own self-healing and intervene as little as possible. Reprocessing is usually experienced as something that happens spontaneously, and new connections and insights are felt to arise quite naturally from within. As a result, most people experience EMDR...
as being a natural and very empowering therapy.

**What evidence is there that EMDR is a successful treatment?**

EMDR is an innovative clinical treatment which has successfully helped over a million individuals. The validity and reliability of EMDR has been established by rigorous research. There are now over nineteen controlled studies into EMDR, making it the most thoroughly researched method used in the treatment of trauma, and The American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, Department of Defense, Veteran's Administration, insurance companies, and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies recognize EMDR as an effective treatment for PTSD. For further information about EMDR, point your Internet browser to www.emdria.org or www.emdr.com.

Before and after EMDR brain scans.
Left photo shows woman with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
Right photo shows same woman after four ninety minute EMDR sessions.
The brightened areas indicate over-activity in the brain. Photo by Dr. Daniel Amen

**Summary of the differences between resolved and unresolved trauma memories.**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>UNRESOLVED</strong></th>
<th><strong>RESOLVED</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The memory is detailed, vivid, “in your face”. It seems more recent then it actually is. Eg “I remember it just like it was yesterday”. It may be relived through dreams or flashbacks.</td>
<td>The memory is less vivid and less detailed. It has lost its sense of immediacy. It has become a part of one’s history. “It happened”. Sleep is not disturbed, and flashbacks do not occur.</td>
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<td>The memory continues to have a strong emotional charge when discussed or thought about.</td>
<td>The memory can be recalled or discussed without significant distress.</td>
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<td>Current events which have some element in common with the trauma event will reactivate the memory and it’s distressing emotions. Patterns of avoiding situations or activities may develop as a result.</td>
<td>Current events which have some element in common with the trauma event no longer reactivate the old memory and its distressing emotions. A person no longer avoids normal situations or activities.</td>
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<td>The person carries negative or unhelpful beliefs from the traumatic event into their present life.</td>
<td>The person can recall the traumatic event, but also think and believe more positive and useful thoughts about themselves in the present.</td>
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