

Trauma Therapies

Trauma is a distressing event in which a person feels severely threatened emotionally, psychologically, or physically. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a well-known trauma related condition that can impact a person's everyday life.

Therapy for specific trauma, such as PTSD, often requires the support, guidance and assistance of mental health professionals. Three common therapies for dealing with trauma are described below.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy

It is similar to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, and can help a person to see disturbing material in a new and less distressing way. EMDR uses the patient's own rapid rhythmic eye movements to dampen the power of emotionally charged memories of past events.

EMDR follows a set of standard protocols that incorporates elements from many different treatment approaches. It can only be done by a trained clinician.

An EMDR session can be up to 90 minutes:

- The therapist will move their fingers back and forth in front of the patient's face and ask them to follow these hand motions with their eyes.
- At the same time, the patient will be asked to recall the disturbing event, and then shift their thoughts to more pleasant ones.

The goal of EMDR therapy is to leave people with the emotions, understanding, and perspectives that will lead to healthy and useful behaviours and interactions.

Cognitive processing therapy (CPT)

It is a treatment for PTSD. It can be used to reduce symptoms related to a variety of traumatic events, such as child abuse, sexual abuse, and natural disasters. CPT is typically run as a 12-session course in either group or individual formats and is a specific type of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This therapy focuses on:

- Educating the patient about the PTSD symptoms and the way the treatment will help them
- Informing the patient about their thoughts and feelings
- Helping the patient develop skills to challenge or question their own thoughts

Exposure therapy

It is a specific type of CBT often used to treat anxiety disorder, PTSD and phobias. In exposure therapy, the patient is exposed to the feared object or context without any danger, which allows them to overcome their anxiety and distress. Confronting their fears in a safe environment can help to reduce fear and decrease avoidance.

This can take place over time, where people repeatedly engage in exposure and find that:

- Their reactions and fears decrease
- They can confront their fears
- They can attach new, realistic beliefs to the situation

There are several variations of exposure therapy to the feared object, situation or activity, including:

- **Direct exposure.** For example, someone with a fear of snakes might handle a snake, or someone with social anxiety might give a speech to an audience.
- **Vivid imagining.** For example, someone with PTSD might be asked to describe their traumatic experience in order to reduce feelings of fear.
- **Virtual exposure.** For example, someone with a fear of flying might take a virtual flight using equipment that provides the sights, sounds and smells of an airplane.