

E.M.D.R. and Pain

Q.

I am a physical therapist specializing in the treatment of complex and chronic pain. Modern pain science views pain as an output of the brain, and there are novel therapies developed within my field to retrain the brain. Many (though certainly not all) of my patients also have a history of trauma. Is there any research (including functional M.R.I.) showing the effects of E.M.D.R. on chronic pain or on centers in the brain particularly associated with pain processing?

Helen Gattling-Austin, Charlottesville, VA

Q.

I've read about and experienced the resolution of some traumas using E.M.D.R., but can E.M.D.R. resolve chronic pain that resulted from a physical injury?

Sally Stone, Northbrook, IL

Dr. Shapiro responds:

In the book "[Practical Pain Management](#)" (2001), A. L. Ray and A. Zbik have a chapter that describes their use of E.M.D.R. therapy for chronic pain. The authors note that the application of E.M.D.R. that is guided by a theoretical formulation known as the adaptive information processing model appears to provide benefits to chronic pain patients not found with other treatments. Specifically, rather than merely managing pain, the treatment often substantially reduces or eliminates it. This occurs because applications of E.M.D.R. therapy have revealed that the pain is frequently caused by the memory of the experience during which the injury took place.

E.M.D.R. therapy cannot remove pain caused by nerve damage. However, many types of pain that seem to have an organic cause are actually the result of "pain memory." For instance, four researchers have independently published articles detailing the successful treatment of "phantom limb" pain. The aggregate of these, as well as anecdotal reports, indicates an 80 percent success rate involving the substantial reduction or elimination of the phantom pain once the trauma memory has been processed. Follow-up assessments reported as long as two years later have revealed stable results. Unfortunately, no brain scans were performed, and no randomized trials have yet been conducted on this topic.

Read more from Dr. Shapiro about EMDR at:

http://consults.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/expert-answers-on-e-m-d-r/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

www.emdr.com