



# EMDR Therapy in Person vs Online: What do the Latest Studies Say About its Effectiveness?

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## What is EMDR Therapy?

EMDR Therapy was developed in the 1980s by American psychologist Francine Shapiro. The theory behind this therapy is that trauma and other negative events can disrupt the adaptive processing of information by brain mechanisms. In EMDR, the therapist directs the patient's eye movements, while the patient focuses on something specific. Eye movement helps stimulate the brain's natural processing of information and overcome blockages that may have been caused by trauma. EMDR therapy is commonly used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but it has also been used to address a wide variety of problems, such as anxiety, depression, addiction, and chronic pain.

## How does EMDR Therapy Work?

During EMDR therapy, the therapist guides the patient through a series of eye movements or other sensory stimuli bilaterally. The theory behind this therapy is that sensory stimulation helps the brain process information in a more adaptive way, allowing the patient to overcome the symptoms of the disorder.

EMDR therapy is made up of eight phases, which include the identification of the traumatic event, the identification of the feelings and sensations associated with the event, the identification of negative thoughts and their replacement with positive thoughts, among other aspects.

Although the hypothesis behind EMDR therapy is not fully understood, scientific evidence shows that the therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of stress-related disorders. Although EMDR therapy is not for everyone, it can be a valid and effective option for those who are seeking treatment for psychological problems related to past traumatic experiences.

We have known for several decades that EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy is one of the most effective in the treatment of problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – and even in its prevention – with consistent scientific evidence and visibility increasingly notable. The use of this practice – which is increasingly taken into account as a Therapeutic Model and not a simple technique – aroused the interest of professionals and researchers in the field of Mental Health and ends up conquering other areas, presenting itself as a reliable practice for intervention in other types of problems, such as difficulties related to anxiety, depression, addictions and personality disorders.

## Scientific Evidence of the Effectiveness of EMDR

EMDR Therapy has been the subject of numerous scientific studies that have examined its effectiveness. In 2013, the World Health Organization included EMDR Therapy on its list of recommended treatments for PTSD. In a 2015 study, researchers reviewed 26 studies comparing EMDR Therapy with other therapies for PTSD. The results showed that EMDR Therapy was more effective than other therapies in reducing PTSD symptoms. A 2014 study

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published in the Journal of EMDR Practice and Research found that 77% of patients who received EMDR therapy for PTSD experienced significant improvement after just 12 sessions.

The studies carried out on EMDR therapy have been extensive and rigorous. One of the most influential studies was conducted by Shapiro in 1989, which evaluated the effect of EMDR therapy on patients with post-traumatic stress disorder. In this study, EMDR therapy was shown to be effective in reducing the symptoms of the disorder in 84% of treated cases.

Another important study was conducted by Ironson, Freund and Strauss in 2002, which evaluated the effect of EMDR therapy in patients with HIV. In this study, EMDR therapy was shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression in these patients.

Additionally, several meta-analyses have confirmed the effectiveness of EMDR therapy in the treatment of stress-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder. In another meta-analysis published in 2019 by Acarturk, Cuijpers, van Straten, de Vries and van Op-  
pen found that EMDR therapy was effective in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, and that its effectiveness was comparable to other well-established therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral. Overall, studies have shown that EMDR Therapy is an effective therapy for treating PTSD and other problems of a mental nature.

### Scientific Evidence of the Efficacy of EMDR in Online Modality

The arrival and installation of the pandemic situation, which we have known since the beginning of 2020, brought us a worsening of mental health (as well as health in general), pushing therapists (and clients) to adapt to a new way of approaching therapy.

We did not have information about the effectiveness of EMDR therapeutic techniques carried out online until very recently – for the simple reason that we did not have validation by the Associations regulating the practice in telematic mode. A rejection that has been softened by the mandatory and successive confinements that the pandemic situation has inflicted on us.

In this sense, and after more than a year, the first studies have begun to emerge that put on the table the discussion about the efficacy of this type of treatment in online mode. It is with Iain McGowan and his collaborators at Queen's University that the first results compiled in a "real-world environment" have emerged. Although two previous studies had already addressed the issue, pointing to a possible reliability of online practice in EMDR Therapy.

McGowan's findings contradict the arguments given so far and that supported the defense of this practice solely and exclusively face-to-face. The study involved 33 therapists with different levels of experience in the application of this methodology and a total of 93 patients with problems of different nature (from severe trauma to depression, anxiety and etc.) and both the experience of the therapists and the report and improvement of symptoms in the patients were taken into account to design the results. The main conclusion reached by the study is that the online practice of this therapeutic modality is efficient in the treatment of a variety of mental health problems.

The same results had already been intuited in previous related works. Such as that of the researcher Corinna Mischeler and collaborators, although this focuses exclusively on the therapist's own experience when evaluating the results of the effectiveness of the application of the technique in telematic mode. Their work, in turn, shows that the most important predictor of symptom reduction is the type of stimulation: eye movements resulted in significantly greater reductions in SUD (Subjective Unit of Disturbance) than *tapping*. On the other hand, in the work of Rinaldo Livio Perri, which, in essence, explores the efficacy of the application of EMDR Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in video conferencing format, he has also demonstrated satisfactory results in their applicability in a virtual environment.

We could conclude that the online therapeutic modality offers the patient the guarantees of efficiency and quality that face-to-face therapy would provide. But we should not end without first emphasizing that what these studies corroborate (rebound) is that: regardless of the modality or technique used, all the therapeutic power emerges from the bond that arises from the relationship between therapist and patient.

Current scientific evidence strongly supports the efficacy of EMDR therapy in the treatment of various stress-related disorders. The studies conducted on this therapy have been rigorous and have consistently shown that EMDR therapy is effective in reducing the symptoms of disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, consumption problems, etc.

It is important to note that EMDR therapy is a specific therapeutic technique that requires training and experience to be properly applied. Therefore, it is essential for individuals seeking treatment with this therapy to ensure that the therapist is properly trained and certified in the technique.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The Author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.