



A Snapshot of Law Enforcement Wellness EMDR

AT A GLANCE

- EMDR is a form of psychotherapy used to treat symptoms of trauma.¹
- EMDR may benefit law enforcement by helping them process vicarious trauma (VT)—a normal response to the consistent exposure to traumatic events.²
- VT can alter a person's identity through distortions of their worldview, thoughts, and behaviors.²
- EMDR can be used to prevent VT from occurring and to treat symptoms of VT when present.³
- EMDR has been shown to be a more effective treatment for symptoms of trauma than other treatments.^{4,5}

WHAT IS EMDR?

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is an integrative, evidence-based psychotherapy used to treat trauma and other stress-related disorders.¹ Traumatic life experiences, whether experienced directly or indirectly, set in motion a pattern of cognitions that shape a person's identity through distortions in their world-view, thoughts, and behaviors.²

EMDR uses bilateral processing, which alternately stimulates the right and left side of the brain while simultaneously recalling the traumatic memory through various methods (e.g., tapping the left and right hand alternately or moving the eyes left and right). EMDR works to treat all components of the traumatic memory including visual images, physiological responses, and the negative self-evaluation associated with the recollection of the event.²

The goal of EMDR is to process and heal the traumatic memory and reduce its negative impact on the individual's well-being, and thereby replace negative self-evaluation with a more realistic, appropriate, and adaptive view.²

WHO USES EMDR?

EMDR was designed to help those who encounter trauma and suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.¹ Additionally, law enforcement professionals may experience vicarious trauma (VT) which is a normal response to consistent exposure to traumatic events. Chronic exposure to traumatic events may take a toll on an officer's mental health by distorting the way they view themselves and the world. Signs of VT include reduced energy and exhaustion; social withdrawal and relationship difficulties; sleep difficulties; an increased sense of danger, paranoia, and/or anxiety; feelings of despair and hopelessness; and cynicism and bitterness about one's life circumstances, career, and/or state of the world.²

EMDR can help law enforcement process VT and decrease the emotional response associated with traumatic memories.² It is important for law enforcement to manage their mental health and well-being to prevent burnout and psychological distress before it affects their personal and professional lives and their ability serve others.





WHEN TO TRY EMDR?

EMDR can be used both as preventative care for those who are at risk of accumulating VT responses in their work before symptoms arise, and as therapeutic care when symptoms of VT are present and causing distress.³ For law enforcement, EMDR can be used as routine mental health maintenance, similar to an annual physical exam, or immediately after a critical incident to help the officer process and resolve traumatic memories before they accumulate. If VT does occur, EMDR can help the officer heal, repair, and reverse any symptoms.²

WHY EMDR VS. OTHER THERAPIES?

Research has shown EMDR to be a more effective treatment for reducing symptoms of trauma than other stress management trainings or psychotherapy treatments.^{4,5} For law enforcement professionals, the greatest benefit is that it specifically targets symptoms that are associated with the demands of the job and the increased exposure to traumatic events. Without proper recovery and processing, symptoms of VT may occur. These symptoms may make it difficult to manage the daily stressors and inherent dangers of an officer's work. These difficulties often spill over into their personal lives, diminishing the well-being of the officer and his/her relationships.² EMDR provides a pathway for officers to counteract the negative symptoms of stress related to their work and find balance in their professional and personal lives by removing obstacles that get in the way of achieving optimal well-being.

Additionally, EMDR is a more efficient psychological treatment than traditional talk-therapy. Officers typically see results within three to six sessions. While the officer is required to recall the traumatic memory during the EMDR treatment, they are not required to go into detail about the event, which reduces the chance of re-traumatization or discomfort.¹

WHERE DO YOU FIND EMDR PRACTITIONERS?

If you have access, reaching out to a mental health professional within your department is a great place to start. Ask if they are EMDR certified or know of anyone who is. First responder peers such as firefighters, nurses, physicians, or paramedics may also know of EMDR practitioners. Working with a practitioner who is familiar with law enforcement is ideal, but not always possible. Online EMDR therapist directories can be found below,^{6,7} or contact NW3C's Wellness and Mental Health Initiative at wellness@nw3c.org for assistance in locating a provider in your area.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH & RESOURCES

Del Vecchio, J. (2020, October 13). *Perspective: Winning the war within-an effective approach*. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin.

► <https://bit.ly/fbiLEB>

EMDR Institute – Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. (2020, June 29). *Research overview*.

► <https://bit.ly/EMDRcom>

Lewis-Schroeder, N. F., Kieran, K., Murphy, B. L., Wolff, J. D., Robinson, M. A., & Kaufman, M. L. (2018). Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment of Traumatic Stress in First Responders: A Review of Critical Issues. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 26(4), 216–227.

► <https://bit.ly/DOlorg>

Ouellette, MA, LPC, L., & Tucson, S. (n.d.). Reprogramming memories: Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. *Rebuilding officer resiliency: A treatment guide*, 23–24.

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¹ EMDR Institute – Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. (2020, June 29). *What is EMDR?* <https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>.

² Keenan, P., & Royle, L. (2008). Vicarious Trauma and First Responders: A Case Study Utilizing Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) as the Primary Treatment Modality. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, 9(4), 291–298.

³ Center for Health and Social Policy: The University of Texas at Austin. (n.d.). *Effectiveness of eye movement desensitization reprocessing as a stress reduction treatment for emergency responders and officers*. <https://chasp.lbj.utexas.edu/research/eye-movement-desensitization-reprocessing>.

⁴ Wilson, S. A., Tinker, R. H., Becker, L. A., & Logan, C. R. (2001). Stress Management with Law Enforcement Personnel: A Controlled Outcome Study of EMDR Versus a Traditional Stress Management Program. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 8(3), 179–200. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1017569700798>

⁵ Jarero, I., Amaya, C., Givaudan, M., & Miranda, A. (2013). EMDR Individual Protocol for Paraprofessional Use: A Randomized Controlled Trial With First Responders. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, 7(2), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1933-3196.7.2.55>

⁶ EMDR Institute – EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING THERAPY. (n.d.). Find a Listing: Find a Clinician Directory. <https://www.emdr.com/SEARCH/index.php>.

⁷ Psychology Today. (n.d.). *Find an EMDR Therapist, EMDR Psychologist, EMDR Counselor*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/emdr/>.