

Treating stressful life events by EMDR

*AMEC 2014 – 2nd Aesthetic & Anti-Aging Medicine European Congress,
Paris, 24.10.2014*

I want to talk to you about the issue: Treating stressful life events by EMDR. I'm working in my own practice since 1993 as a medical specialist for psychotherapeutic medicine and psychoanalysis, and got further specialisation in trauma therapy. Since 2002 I'm certified as an EMDR therapist and I'm working with this technique ever since.

When I got this invitation for the presentation, I was glad, to get an opportunity to talk about EMDR and to propagate it outside of our expert field.

But then I asked myself, why here, at a congress for aesthetic & anti – aging medicine. But then I thought: yes, indirectly it's right: EMDR can rejuvenate and detain aging without scalpel and pharmacology, because it dissolves pathological stress. Since a long time it's known: stress, especially permanent stress changes in a biochemical way every single cell, and causes premature cell aging. But the longterm improvement of quality of life by stress reduction is the decisive aspect to stay healthy in the long run. Because of that, it makes greatest sense, to reduce inner stress, where and whenever you are able to.

But now: what is EMDR?

The issue is complex and there is only little time, so I will explain it shortly. The abbreviation means: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It's a form of psychotherapy or a technique, which was developed approximately 1990 by Dr. Francine Shapiro a psychologist from California, for the treatment of traumatic stress disorders. Simply said: to induce new processing of information in the brain of people with stressful life events by quick eye movements alternating back forth from right to left. Meanwhile it's well known that this so called bilateral stimulation of the brain through the eyes also works

through acoustic stimulation or tactile stimulation, i.e. alternately touching or tapping the right and left hand. In some cases you can work with the technique directly, sometimes it appears necessary during a longer current psychotherapy. EMDR utilizes the body's natural healing ability and allows the brain to heal psychological problems at the same rate as the rest of the body heals physical ailments.

Because EMDR allows the mind and body to heal at the same rate, treatment can be rapid. The number of sessions required for EMDR treatment, however, will vary according to the complexity of the issues being dealt with. In general, the more isolated the traumatic memory being treated, the shorter the treatment tends to be.

Dr. Shapiro presented recently new research results, showing that EMDR is not only for treatment of traumatic stress, but also for symptoms resulting from other stressful life events. They can generate the core symptom of a later depression or anxiety symptomatology. Because of that, it makes absolutely sense to process our own stressful life experiences with EMDR, to counteract a depressive disease on the long run. And these researches are corresponding completely with my personal experiences in longterm psychotherapies, after integrating EMDR for special targets.

Our everyday life has become strenuous and demanding, both in private and professional contexts, demanding extreme adjustment mechanism of ourselves.

Normal life should go in such a way, that all abilities, skills and self – healing powers inside of us are good enough, to manage difficult and extreme life situations. But nevertheless, events can happen, suddenly or as a constant stress, exceeding our inner capacities . We cannot handle our self–regulation sufficiently any more. At this point working with EMDR can be used at first for so – called resource installation. In stress situations we are focused only to our problems, our deficits and failings and are losing the connection to our

competence and our coping strategies .We try to bring these abilities and skills back into conscious focus or try to develop a new access. To embed these new experiences in the brain, bilateral stimulation works better than only speaking about the resources can accomplish.

If the amount of mental stress is beyond our capabilities by an overwhelming event or by being repeatedly subjected to distress, this healing process may become overloaded, leaving the original disturbing experiences unprocessed. In a special way this situation gets stuck and these unprocessed memories can be stored in the brain in a "raw" form and are causing constant stress.

In detail that means for example: we feel inner restlessness, strong heart palpitations, sweating. Sleep disturbances can appear, anxieties and more. At this point it is important to indicate that EMDR will not diminish normal reactions in stressful moments. Everybody of us will react with stress, more or less, if there are huge mental burdens. Deep inside of us the animal is active, in an archaic sense it's about fleeing or attacking. But afterwards we should regain our inner mental peace and find a way to handle the specific problems. That means also that the whole body should calm down again, not reacting anymore. If they persist, you should consider a posttraumatic reaction or even a posttraumatic disease.

As a short overview:

In the secure setting of the psychotherapeutic situation working with EMDR the client is focussing on the stressful memory, which is not processed enough and causes different symptoms. The client is concentrating on this memory in a special systematic way, the therapist instructs him to, while executing the bilateral stimulation. If the stimulation has a positive result, the stress symptoms will reduce.

A colleague described it one day like this: stuck memories are like a file on you desktop. Before working with EMDR it reappears every day and after the treatment with EMDR the file goes to the archive.

A lot of unprocessed situations are stored in our body memory. Meanwhile research shows: so-called attachment traumas of our childhood play a significant role, more than we ever thought about. The increasing relevance of these aspects for mental development are obvious and seem to be decisive factors of how we can manage our daily life as adults.

This means: situations of our childhood in which we were dependent of the protection and attentive behaviour of our caregivers, because we could not calm down without them. But maybe we didn't get enough of it. This means: too little calming down, lack of sufficient support results in overwhelming feelings. Now, being adult, the childhood is long ago, we have overcome everything, are not busy with it any longer.

Unforeseen life events can disturb suddenly the already stressful biochemical balance of the brain even further, for example loss of job, burn – out, financial troubles, accidents or deaths of loved ones and can generate a dramatic psychological reaction.

These experiences are associated with extreme feelings of helplessness and ever growing feeling of powerlessness. But exactly these feelings are now acting like an emotional bridge to the inner experiences, which are long gone. The feelings of these experiences can be continually re-evoked furthermore when experiencing events that are similar. They are affecting us in a way that is difficult to stand, and we are not conscious that they are a result from our early childhood. Not processed feelings from those events long ago can reduce under treatment with EMDR.

Since I work with this method, again and again I have been impressed of the effect of EMDR, contributing to a significant reduction in stress levels. I followed a lot of clients through huge developments and became witness of impressing changes. But before I worked with clients with EMDR I could experience the effect on myself. And that is why I'm absolutely convinced about this method.

For better understanding I would like to tell you something of my own traumatic childhood. When I was about 2 years old I came down with the disease of polio, together with my mother and my sister. My mother died after some days as a result of the disease. Because of the severity of the paralysis my sister and I had been hospitalized under isolation for about 6 weeks.

Fortunately, I recovered from all my symptoms. I had no active own memories regarding this early time in childhood. As long I can remember, going to hospitals or visits to medical professionals always let me stress levels raise very quickly and also anxiety. Of course I always thought that there was a connection between my hospitalization and my problems as an adult, but I never recognized these feelings as symptoms. I more and more understood the meaning of these symptoms, the more current research evolved.

Round about the year 2000 I had extreme stress in my private life, which resulted in strong feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. I had no doubt that my reaction was due to the current events. But I also had the feeling that my reaction was very extreme and above all, it persisted, although certain things changed positively. I'm a good observer and wondered about my extreme reaction and its persistence.

Not long before I had heard about EMDR and looked for a therapist, with whom I could work. To my complete surprise, when focusing under EMDR the actual situation, images of a situation in a room came up, with me lying in a bed, feeling myself very small, trying to sit up but not being able to move, helplessness, excitement and more extreme feelings. Also I saw my sister lying in a bed, me crying and trying to reach her, but I was not able to.

Step by step different components came together: feelings, images, body feelings, acoustic signals and more appeared. I cannot say they were memories, but from my deep inner feeling they were very

familiar and I felt, as if it would happen just in that moment. Due to the bilateral stimulation in different sessions stress dropped down. This was only a short summary.

After the sessions I talked about the past with my sister, because I was so surprised about the content of the sessions. Being ten years older than me she had some clear memories of that time. I made a rough draft of the room I had seen under EMDR, did not show it to her, only asked her to describe the room, to check the reality. My feeling was I was lying on my back in a bed with bars, could look to the right side by turning round the head to another bed, where she lying. I could also feel movements behind my head. Because of that I had the idea that there could have been a door. She confirmed that our beds had been in that position I had seen.

The movement behind my head was no door, but a big window, where visitors could look at us, waving their hands and gesticulating. They weren't allowed to come inside because of the isolation.

During EMDR I also remembered a regular dripping sound, on my left in states of excitement. When I talked about it to her she could remember in that moment, that there was always a dripping tap above a sink on the wall on the left side of my bed. After EMDR the stress of the actual situation lessened notably and some symptoms vanished completely. Dripping taps had always been a reason for me, to feel uncomfortable. Also this symptom, even banal disappeared since that time. Taken as a whole after some EMDR sessions I had the feeling, to be able to better manage the actual situation, being calmer.

I would be very happy if I could make you curious today and have you keep these four letters in your mind: EMDR. Look for more information or even to try to find an EMDR – therapist, if you are interested in it. It is very important that you should look for certified therapists. EMDR belongs into the skilled hands of experienced therapists, often with attendant psychotherapy. Even though at a

first glance it seems to be very simple, it's a highly effective method of psychotherapy, and also has its risks and side effects.

You can find more information, as well as certified therapists here:

<http://www.emdr-europe.org>

or

EMDRIA Germany:

E-Mail: info@emdria.de

Website: www.emdria.de