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*Kelly Doherty/MEDILL*

*Stimulation equipment that therapist Vanessa Ford uses for treatment of PTSD. Auditory and tactile stimulation help people reprocess memories.*

## A treatment to take the stress out of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

by KELLY C. DOHERTY

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"The pain that I was in was so severe, I was crying 18 hours a day," said Kate Keleher, referring to the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on her life.

That was before she discovered Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) treatment, a comprehensive therapy for PTSD that uses horizontal eye movements or other repetitive and bi-lateral stimulation such as auditory tones or tapping during sessions. Bi-lateral means both eyes, both ears or both hands receive the same stimulation.

Physicians are still researching how and why this form of stimulation works so well. But high rates of success with it have been reported among mental health professionals and in studies according to Scott Blech, executive director of the EMDR International Association.

"You usually see a very rapid decrease in anxiety during the sessions," said Susan Rogers, a psychologist at the Coatesville VA Medical Center in Coatesville, Pa., that specializes in the treatment of PTSD.

The treatment is becoming more widely used within the VA due to the waves of returning vets from Iraq and Afghanistan, but is also relied upon among patients in private care. An estimated 300,000 members of the military deployed in the Middle East may suffer from PTSD.

The therapy was discovered in 1987 and is considered to be newer in relation to other treatments. It is known for producing noticeable results early on in the treatment and if it is completed successfully, experts say it can relieve patients of all of their symptoms of PTSD.

Keleher, an independent film producer who has not served in the military, said she suffered for years with PTSD while living in Chicago. She reached a crisis point about 10 years ago, and became suicidal.

"My brain never stopped. I felt attacked by my own emotions and had not control over what was happening to me," she said.

Keleher had tried other forms of therapy such as counseling and medication but, for her, they seemed to work as a "Band-aid," giving her only temporary relief from her problems. After seeing an ad for EMDR treatment in the Chicago Reader, she said she decided to try it.

"The language of the ad matched what I was feeling," she said. After one session with a therapist, Keleher said she noticed a departure from what had become obsessive habits and that her crying had stopped.

"I went from crying 18 hours a day to never crying like that again after one session," she said.

After completing three sessions in Chicago, Keleher said her symptoms were essentially gone and she moved to Arizona to be with her family and continue her career in the film industry.

Experts say results vary based on the severity of patient experiences and memories. Rogers said that, in her practice, she has seen lasting results after about 12 sessions. She said studies show that 78 percent of veterans who had undergone the treatment no longer met the criteria for PTSD after 12 sessions.

The EMDR Institute website cites studies that report 77-90 percent of civilians who underwent the treatment no longer suffered the symptoms that met the PTSD diagnosis after three to seven sessions.

EMDR is conducted in phases in order to identify traumatic experiences or memories, desensitize the patient to them so they are no longer emotionally disturbing, and help the individual to form positive feelings about themselves and their experiences.

During the process, they are stimulated visually, with auditory tones, or with equipment that provides tactile sensations, and the clinician observes and checks in as the patient reports changes. Pairing the recognition of traumatic memories and desensitization with the repetitive, bi-lateral stimulation helps the brain reprocess memories so they no longer cause pain.

The goal of a session is to "have no distress when they think about the memory, no distress that they feel in the body and a positive idea about themselves that feels accurate," Rogers said.

Although PTSD is often associated with veterans, rape victims, and others who have witnessed horrific events, Keleher said that her PTSD stemmed from a series of events and situations throughout her life combined with her tendency to be "extraordinarily sensitive."

After completing EMDR treatment ten years ago, she said that she has not suffered from symptoms of PTSD since. She likened PTSD to a clog in the brain, and said that EMDR unclogs the brain and helps process the information properly.

Rogers said research is still being done on how exactly this therapy helps to relieve patients of their PTSD symptoms, but that patients who have undergone the treatment generally report a greater sense of context and insight into their memories.

"One of the things that I really like about EMDR is that it ties together cognition, self concept, emotions and bodily sensations along with memories and it does it in a very elegant and systematic way," said Chicago therapist Vanessa Ford. "I've had good results with it – it's tough to say if it is the bi-lateral stimulation that is unique or the very tight protocol around the counseling."

Rogers said its use within the VA began in the early 1990s in Coatesville and trainings have been conducted at many VA hospitals around the country since then. In 2004 the Department of Defense guidelines for PTSD named EMDR as one of the four recommended treatments for PTSD within the VA, she said.

"I've used it with veterans from all different eras. It seems to work very well no matter how old the trauma is or how old the client is," said Rogers. Since military personnel often face multiple traumatic events during a tour of duty, this treatment is especially helpful because it allows for more than one memory or emotion to be addressed, possibly in one session, she said.

Blech said that need for EMDR extends beyond the VA and private sector and has an international presence as well.

"Internationally unfortunately the need has grown exponentially with natural disaster," he said, and many more mental health professionals are being trained around the world to combat PTSD after these events.

To become trained in EMDR, Blech said mental health professionals need to be licensed and have advanced degrees in their fields, and then they can participate in a 50 hour training program.

"I was a prisoner in my body and EMDR took those bars away," Keleher said.



*Kelly Doherty/MEDILL*

*Chicago therapist Vanessa Ford demonstrates hand movements used for visual stimulation in as part of a therapy for PTSD.*

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