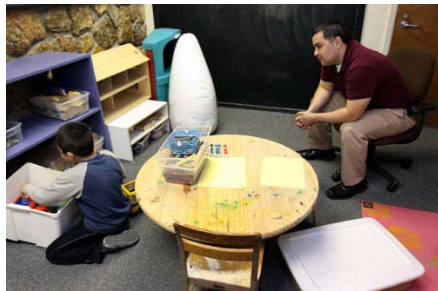


## PTSD in children: New technique helps therapists help kids cope

by Victor R. Martinez \ El Paso Times

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Therapist Tim Mendoza of the El Paso Child Guidance Center observes a young patient with post-traumatic stress disorder before using a new technique called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. The technique involves a patient recalling an unpleasant memory while moving his or her eyes side to side and breathing deeply until the distress is reduced. (Niki Rhynes / El Paso Times)

Many adults have the strength to cope with traumas.

Children, on the other hand, can be left emotionally disorganized and hopeless, with a

sense of betrayal, daily fear, an overwhelming sense of helplessness -- and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Part of the problem is, people don't think kids can get (PTSD)," said Cathy Gaytan, the clinical director for the El Paso Child Guidance Center. "Parents don't know what to look for."

Through a grant from the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, the guidance center received more than \$37,000 for six days of extensive training in a treatment called EMDR, for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, to treat PTSD.

"We have higher degrees of post-traumatic stress disorder in this region, not just from families exposed to the violence in Ciudad Juárez, but from families who have military coming home from the war," said Enrique Mata, senior program officer with the Paso del Norte Health Foundation. "The Child Guidance Center is one of the main groups who treat children, youth and family who are having issues with post-traumatic stress disorder."

The Child Guidance Center sees about 2,000 patients a year for all types of mental problems.

EMDR helps clients get access to and process the traumatic memory.

"The client gets access to the memory by the therapist stimulating each side of the brain, alternating sides, through eye movements, sounds or hand taps," Gaytan said. "Through the eight-phase EMDR process, the therapist

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helps the client resolve the traumatic memory and experience a reduction in symptoms."

Eighteen therapists from area nonprofit agencies, including five from the El Paso Child Guidance Center, were trained in EMDR in March.

"A lot of times, when people go through traumatic events -- and it could be victims of violence, physical or emotional child abuse or something that happened in childhood -- a lot of those memories get locked in, in a dysfunctional storage, and you are not able to process those memories," said Tim Mendoza, a therapist trained in traumatic treatment.

Mendoza said that when a traumatic memory is trapped like that, what happens in the present can trigger memories of what happened in the past.

"What we are helping them do is get those memories unstuck so they can process them in a healthy way," he said.

"I've been using (EMDR) with patients who have suffered emotional trauma and victims of the violence in Juárez," he said. "They have come in with symptoms like physical aggression, hostility, anger, nightmares. And going through the process of EMDR with them, they have reduced those symptoms almost to nothing."

The National Institute of Mental Health reports that by age 16, 25 percent of children will have experienced at least one traumatic event. In El Paso, that would be more than 40,000 children.

"I've talked to kids who can't sleep, are afraid of people, are afraid of being in a car if they were involved in an accident in a car, hearing loud noises like gunshots or fireworks," Mendoza said. "It not only startles them but it frightens them really bad."

One of Mendoza's patients is a child who saw his little brother drown in a swimming pool. This little boy's sister is also in therapy.

"I knew something was wrong when he would not talk to anyone and my daughter would isolate herself from everyone," said the children's mother, who did not want to be identified.

"It started to cause a lot of problems at school. He would always act like he was sick so he didn't have to go to school, and she would have emotional outbursts. They never did that before."

She was referred to the El Paso Child Guidance Center by a counselor at her daughter's school.

The children have been in therapy for 10 months.

"I saw a change in them in two months," their mom said. "I started to see their old selves, but they go back and forth. They have not completely adjusted."

Even seeing that little bit of their old selves brings a stream of tears down their mother's cheeks.

"I feel like I have my babies back," she said. "I felt like I had a connection with them again. At o

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ne point I felt that I had lost all three of them, not just one."

Source: El Paso Child Guidance Center.

She added, "They went back to the swimming pool this summer. Before, he would panic when we would pass by a pool and she would say, 'Not there, not there, not there.' But now they asked me if they can get in the pool.

"Not me -- I'm still nervous -- but we are getting better."

Gaytan said there is a definite end to treatment.

"We rely on mom and child to tell us when they are ready," she said. "We would look for, are the symptoms better, has the angry gone down, are they enjoying things more, are they doing well in school.

"We are temporary. Parents are permanent."

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#### Symptoms of PTSD in children

- Replaying the traumatic event over and over in their head.
- Nightmares, scary dreams.
- Irritability, anger.
- Jumping when hearing loud noises.
- Nervousness about everyone and everything around the child.
- Numbness or lack of emotion.
- Avoidance of thoughts, feelings or places that remind the child of the event.
- Bedwetting.
- Clinginess.

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