

Eye Movements and Memory

By Ellen I. Carni

Stagefright's reign of terror may be on the wane for performing artists! A new psychotherapeutic technique, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing [EMDR], has shown that it can not only eliminate performance anxiety, but can actually enhance performance.

Consider the dramatic success of one of my recent cases. Eric, 48, a conservatory-trained pianist, suffered from stagefright throughout his career. Although successful, he was still so preoccupied with fears about memory slips and other mishaps that the expressive impact of his performance was consistently compromised. After undergoing six years of traditional psychotherapy, he decided to try something new. Within a dozen 90-minute sessions of EMDR, he changed his entire attitude about performing and came to see each concert as an opportunity to improve and to share the beauty of the music with his audience.

His coach, stunned at the difference in his performance (following the last EMDR session), commented, "I could not believe what I heard....I was overwhelmed to hear authentic musicality and control flowing so naturally out of that wordless magical center....I cannot get over your gorgeous rubatos and nuances in everything, especially in the Berceuse....No wonder they clapped in the middle of your group....To say congratulations is putting it mildly. You are a success story."

◆ **How EMDR Began** A method that integrates psychology and physiology, EMDR acts on the brain to transform disturbing memories that restrict people's lives, thereby freeing them to express their full potential. Developed

in 1987 by psychologist Dr. Francine Shapiro for the treatment of trauma survivors, EMDR has quickly become one of the top remedies for post-traumatic stress. Now practiced worldwide, it is being used effectively with more common conditions such as anxiety and depression and, as in my practice, for enhancing creativity and performance.

In 1987, Shapiro, then a 38-year-old graduate student who had been through a divorce and had overcome cancer, noticed during a summer walk that the disturbing memories preoccupying her seemed to vanish as she spontaneously moved her eyes rapidly back and forth. Intrigued by her unexpected discovery, she experimented with volunteers, obtained similar results, then organized the first formal research study that became her doctoral dissertation.

All of her subjects reported that their memories lost most of their devastating charge after one 60-minute session, while a control group that simply called up a memory without using eye movements showed no relief at all. Three months later, those in the EMDR group had maintained their gains with only a slight drop.

◆ **How EMDR Works** EMDR starts with the assumption that all situations that you have experienced as emotionally painful can be classified as variations of trauma. Traumas upset your brain's biochemistry and keep you from mastering them. As a result, the negative feelings you had and irrational beliefs you drew from those experiences remain frozen in your nervous system. In the case of pianists, for example, traumatic experi-

ences induced by perfectionistic parents and critical music teachers may have led you to harbor unnecessary feelings like, "I feel humiliated when I am criticized," or distorted self-perceptions such as, "I am only valuable if I am perfect."

Over time, you may forget these feelings and beliefs on a conscious level, but they become locked inside your body. Later, when faced with performance demands, symptoms of distress arise without your awareness of their origins. The EMDR technique "unfreezes" the nervous system and releases traumas. As painful memories surface and are desensitized, you spontaneously begin to view yourself and the traumatic events in a healthier, more positive way.

Exactly how EMDR reprocesses trauma is still somewhat of an enigma, but current research points to three mechanisms: EMDR may reproduce REM sleep (dreaming) in the waking state; improve communication between the brain's hemispheres; or initiate a change in brain chemistry leading directly to desensitization of negative information.

The key component of the technique is the stimulation of alternate sides of your brain during the desensitization and reprocessing phase [DR]. Since Shapiro originally utilized eye movements [EMs], or sight, to stimulate the brain, she named the technique EMDR.

◆ **An EMDR Session** Today we know that sight, touch, and sound are equally effective in desensitization and reprocessing as long as the brain is stimulated bilaterally. In the original EMDR method, the practitioner passes his or her hand in front of your field of vision while you follow with side-to-side movements of your eyes, thereby sending nerve impulses to each side of your brain. In newer methods, the practitioner may use a light bar that flashes back and forth in front of your eyes; finger tappers that send vibrations through your fingers to your brain; or an audioscan, a small device with a headset that sends soothing tones to each of your ears in an

alternating rhythm or music embedded with bilateral undertones. This last device, in my observation, is especially appealing to musicians.

The actual EMDR protocol has a more complex format. In brief, you and your practitioner first establish *target issues*, such as panic onstage, memory lapses, difficulty modulating emotion; *target memories*, such as a particularly stressful concert, an early childhood incident; *negative beliefs and feelings*, such as "I am not in control ... I feel helpless" and *positive goals*, such as "I am in control and feel relaxed." During desensitization and reprocessing, you think of the targets, then let your mind wander as your practitioner stimulates alternate sides of your brain using one of the methods described above. Resting between sets of brain stimulation, you report your experiences.

In general, experiences first move to memories, thoughts, feelings, and images related to the targets. You may remember long-buried events with their original impact. By reliving past events with brain stimulation, you rid them of their disturbing power and allow in a flow of increasingly positive and hopeful thoughts, feelings, images, and anticipated events that your practitioner "installs" with more sets of brain stimulation.

◆ **Pianists and EMDR** The following two examples are taken from my practice. In the first case, a female pianist recovered a childhood memory during processing in which she asked for a particular doll for Christmas, only to be given a different doll. She re-experienced the sadness and frustration of that experience. This memory was followed by other memories in which her parents did not respond to her communications or give her emotional support during times of stress. She made the connection that when she is onstage, she believes that her audience does not hear what she is trying to communicate through the music. "I tried and tried to communicate. I wasn't effective. Then I gave up....With the music [I try to communicate, then] I lose my focus. I

know it's irrational." She saw herself hunched over the piano in a black cloud from which no communication could exit. Her arms and hands felt heavy. Then everything went black.

From that point on, there was a shift to positive images. She moved from the cloud into a protective bubble from which she could communicate with confidence. That bubble felt "like home," a good home. Her arms and hands felt lighter. For the first time, she was able to "suspend disbelief" about her relationship with her audience: "I can feel people listening to me....Who am I to say they are not enjoying it....That's good enough reason to play." She saw herself standing back, allowing the presence of the music to take over. "I am no longer self-conscious." After her next concert, she reported feeling empowered. "There were no bad voices at all ... and no slips." She felt ready to take on her next concert without fear.

In the second case, during processing, a young man moved into the heart of his conflict between "playing for my life," that is, as a desperate way to escape his restrictive early life, and "playing for self-expression." He juxtaposed memories of his exacting unemotional "masculine" father who called him a "show-off" with current experiences of his more permissive "maternal" male piano teacher.

He saw himself playing a piece for the left hand, which he identified as his dominant "masculine" hand. He then felt both hands warm up and begin to communicate with each other, symbolic of, in his words, "definitely a masculine-feminine integration."

Next, he heard himself playing a Brahms piece in which his hands "needed to talk to each other." Suddenly, his left hand opened up as if it had just dropped something. He reported that the hand had "let go" of his father and "let in" his teacher. He heard the teacher say he did not have to let his left hand dominate, that he had a choice in how to use his hands. He reported he no longer felt controlled by his father, by an outside force. He experienced himself as being able to control the balance between his

hands. He noted, "It wasn't an intellectual process. I felt as if a block had been lifted between my thinking about the music and my being able to implement my ideas." In addition, he felt freer to make choices that would bring more fulfillment to his life in general.

◆ **Using EMDR** With the goals of reducing anxiety and improving performance in mind, it is advisable that you play in at least one and, preferably, two concerts or recitals during EMDR treatment in order to test and solidify your gains. In a pre-concert session, you can utilize brain stimulation to "install" resources for banishing negative thoughts that enter your mind while you are onstage, and in a post-concert session, you can review and "install" your gains with brain stimulation and plan targets for areas that still need work.

Because of the skill required in EMDR's implementation and its power to evoke strong memories and emotions, the EMDR Institute trains only licensed mental health professionals. EMDR is not intended as a simple technique to provide instantaneous resolution to complex life problems. In the hands of a competent clinician, EMDR can be a potent tool for removing internal barriers to effective performing and successful living. Making a good connection with your practitioner is as essential to the outcome as any other aspect of EMDR. If you are ready for change, have made a good connection with your practitioner, and resonate with the EMDR method, the results can be remarkable. ✦

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