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San Jose Counseling

Treatment Of Trauma

Individuals and couples seek counseling for a myriad of reasons, however, one of the most common issues is anxiety...that horrible feeling where your heart is racing, your hands are tingling, your breathing is becoming more and more shallow, and a sense of "impending doom" or terror overwhelms you... sounds familiar? Just as challenging, or even more painful are the memories of early childhood abuse (physical, emotional or sexual), marital abuse or even a single event, all of which results in trauma. The biggest misconception about trauma is that it has to be something horrific. Although terrorizing events such as witnessing people being harmed or killed are traumatizing, the neglect of children and their needs can be equally traumatizing. The person who was gang raped, the police officer who shoots and kills his/her first victim in an armed robbery, the five-year old who is left home alone for hours with nothing to eat in the dark...they all will experience the same thing in their brain: trauma, and the treatment of choice is the same...it is called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).

“Although the amygdala has many functions, one of them is to let the brain know whether or not an event or experience feels safe (fear processing), so think of the amygdala as the brain’s ‘fire alarm.’ All emotional memories are stored in the amygdala, and the most intense and disturbing ones get stored in the right amygdala.”

BEFORE EXPLAINING WHAT EMDR IS, FIRST, IT IS IMPORTANT to explain how the brain stores trauma. In the middle part of the brain (the limbic system, which is responsible for emotions, hunger, thirst and one’s sex drive), sits two little glands (one on each side of the brain) called the amygdala. Although the amygdala has many functions, one of them is to let the brain know whether or not an event or experience feels safe (fear processing), so think of the amygdala as the brain’s “fire alarm.” All emotional memories are stored in the amygdala, and the most intense and disturbing ones get stored in the right amygdala. Also on each side of the brain is the hippocampus, which is responsible for storing long-term memory. One of its functions is to add meaning and context during every event. Dr. Gail Gross writes that, “Everything we learn, everything we read, everything we do, everything we understand, and everything we experience count on the hippocampus to function correctly” (Gross, 2013), and according to Goleman (2006), “The hippocampus is especially vulnerable to ongoing emotional distress, because of the damaging effects of [the stress hormone] cortisol” (p.273). Goleman also stated, “When the body endures ongoing stress, cortisol affects the rate at which neurons (brain cells) are either added or subtracted from the hippocampus. This can be a tremendous assault on learning. When the neurons are attacked by cortisol, the hippocampus loses neurons and is reduced in size” (p. 273).

> continued on page 37



Families First

> continued from page 34

orce is 6-months and one-day from service of the petition. The couple can finalize their divorce agreement prior to that date, but have to wait before for their status to change. For example, John has Amy served with the petition on June 28, 2013. The soonest they can be divorced is December 29, 2013. However, suppose John and Amy did not complete their divorce by December 29, 2013. This day will pass and nothing will happen in their case, unless they request that their status be bifurcated (a topic outside the scope of this article).

Finally, the party should be ready. Divorce is not easy. Prepare yourself emotionally, physically and spiritually. Often, filing for a divorce is a sign of war, especially if the other party is unaware. It often results in a race to hire lawyers and a court fight. You want to avoid this at all costs. If possible, discuss the divorce with one another. Hopefully, it can be done peacefully. If needed, seek out the help of a professional. In that conversation, discuss the filing of the petition, the service of the petition, and how you desire to pur-

sue the divorce action (i.e. amicably through mediation). You may even discuss who will be the petitioner (the person that initiates the divorce action). Even if one party does not want the divorce, the party should absolutely participate or risk losing a great deal. In my practice, I prepare the petition for the couple, review it in session with both parties and file it for them. Although only one person is the petitioner, this process allows both to be involved. We then serve the petition on the other spouse (respondent) by mail or in my office to take away the sting or embarrassment that might happen when served in public. □

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San Jose Counseling

> continued from page 35

Jordan Shafer puts it best: "When there is excessive stress on the receiving, signalling and switching part of the mid-brain called the amygdala, then another part of the brain, the hippocampus, will be inhibited from 'thinking' about the experience to give it perspective. Memories of the event or experience are stored by the mind as feelings, body sensations and visual images and without the use of language (semantic representations) for understanding or interpretation, that is, hippocampal cognitive evaluation. This means that for stressful experiences – this includes but is not limited to childhood – the 'cognitive' evaluation of the experience will be impaired and the information (memories) derived from it will be stored very differently than if there is no stress. This is important because the experiences shift from being memories you can consciously think about to memories that show up as feelings, body sensations or images only. This may result in having feelings such as anxiety or fear and not understanding them or knowing where they're coming from" (Shafer, 2013).

So, what exactly is EMDR, how does it work? It is an internationally recognized approach to trauma, anxiety, panic and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Decades ago, these conditions took a long time to treat, however, the discovery of EMDR by Dr. Francine Shapiro brought quick and lasting relief for the above conditions. EMDR therapy uses bilateral stimulation (right and left eye movement similar to rapid eye movement in deep sleep), or sometimes tactile stimulation, which, according to Dr. Carol Boulware, "activates opposite sides of the brain, releasing emotional ex-

periences that are 'trapped' in the nervous system. This assists the neurophysiological system, the basis of the mind/body connection, to free itself of blockages and reconnect itself. As troubling images and feelings are processed by the brain via the eye-movement patterns of EMDR, resolution of the issues and a more peaceful state are achieved."

The EMDR Institute in Watsonville uses the following analogy to describe how EMDR works: "When you cut your hand, your body works to close the wound. If a foreign object or repeated injury irritates the wound, it festers and causes pain. Once the block is removed, healing resumes. EMDR therapy demonstrates that a similar sequence of events occurs with mental processes. The brain's information processing system naturally moves toward mental health. If the system is blocked or imbalanced by the impact of a disturbing event, the emotional wound festers and can cause intense suffering. Once the block is removed, healing resumes. Using the detailed protocols and procedures learned in EMDR training sessions, clinicians help clients activate their natural healing processes" (EMDR Institute website: www.emdr.com) □

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