

Getting Past Your Past: Take Control of Your Life with Self-Help Techniques from EMDR Therapy

By Francine Shapiro, PhD

Review by Susan Brown, LCSW, BCD

Perm J 2013 Spring;17(2):e109-110

<http://dx.doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-134>

Getting Past Your Past is a fascinating book recommended by some of the top neuroscientists of our time: Bessel van der Kolk, Norman Doidge, Daniel Siegel, and Stephen Porges,¹ all of whom have taken a keen interest in Francine Shapiro, PhD's breakthrough therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). The therapy is an empirically supported treatment for adverse life experiences and its sequelae, recommended by organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association and the Department of Defense. *Getting Past Your Past* illustrates rapid treatment effects through detailed case examples that offer a "window into the brain," demonstrating the intricate linkages that occur when the brain's natural *information processing* system is set in motion.

The Kaiser Permanente Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study² indisputably demonstrated that early disturbing life experiences are significantly correlated with almost all of the major mental and physical health problems including (but not limited to) obesity, anorexia, depression, suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, HIV, heart and liver disease, and smoking. These experiences have too long been underestimated as the most significant contributors to overall health and well-being later in life. The ACE Study findings integrate seamlessly with EMDR therapy, which proposes that early disturbing events set the foundation for future development of all manner of disorders. Readers are led through a variety of techniques for identifying the specific events that are the foundation of a person's individual cluster of symptoms.

Dr Shapiro explains that these events are stored as unprocessed memories that incorporate the images, beliefs, and physical sensations experienced at the time of the event. Current situations can trigger these unprocessed memories and manifest as symptoms in the present. Numerous case examples woven throughout each chapter demonstrate the application of this concept to diverse clinical presentations including the effective treatment of phantom limb pain. The successful use of EMDR therapy has demonstrated that this excruciating, often intractable chronic pain, emanating from limbs that no longer exist, appears to be caused by the unprocessed memories of the event during which the limb was injured.³ Additional real life client stories include panic and anxiety disorder, depression, codependency, relational difficulties, chronic pain, substance abuse, eating disorders, unexplained somatic (body) complaints, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Each of these clients are treated with EMDR

therapy such that their symptoms are resolved, but the manner in which the connections are made by the brain during the healing process is endlessly fascinating and surprising. It is not a linear journey—associated memory networks needed for full integration can pop up from the most surprising places.

For example, "Bill" was referred for EMDR therapy for his sexual impotence. In using one of the techniques described in the book, he identified the memory, which provided the basis of his problem: his parents divorced when he was six years old, at which time his mother told him he was "doing a bad job of replacing his father ... now, as an adult, his mother's recent illness, which caused her to move into a nursing home, had triggered his guilt, the memory of her disappointment with him, and her words that he was 'not being a man.' His 'impotence' was a current physical expression of his feelings of inadequacy."^{1p165} Once the memory of the earlier experience was processed with EMDR therapy and his inappropriate sense of responsibility relieved, his sexual feelings and abilities returned.

Getting Past Your Past helps readers connect the dots to discover why they do what they do, even when they don't want to be doing it. Numerous self-help techniques are taught that are used in the Preparation Phase of EMDR therapy to help people deal with the distress that arises when they are unexpectedly triggered into past memory networks that have not yet been resolved. However, the author responsibly recommends throughout the book that if symptoms are serious and persistent, professional help should be sought.

In a particularly touching chapter called "A Part of the Whole," Dr Shapiro captures a few stories of society's most damaged individuals: child molesters, perpetrators of domestic violence, and drug addicts. She states, "We need to remember that *why* they aren't learning to control their destructive behavior is part of the problem that keeps them stuck. Unfortunately, as a society we have often given up on these people—and they've given up on themselves."^{1p216} Both victims and perpetrators report how their internal processes differed before and after treatment—as well as the insights and emotional connections that occurred. Ten child molesters participated in a study examining the effect of adding eight sessions of EMDR therapy, directed at the memory



New York: Rodale Books, 2012

ISBN-10: 1609619951

ISBN-13: 978-1609619954

Hardcover: 352 Pages
\$26.99

of their own molestation as children, to the traditional program of group therapy and self-monitoring techniques.⁴ The benefits were clear in nine of the ten molesters. The men, realizing the damage they had caused, came to take full responsibility for what they had done instead of blaming their victims. Most remarkably though, the researchers used a device called a penile plethysmograph, which measures blood flow to the penis to gauge sexual arousal, a primary indicator for future offending. This test showed that in nine of ten offenders, sexual arousal in response to images of children had declined steeply. The offenders explained that they now viewed the children as “people” rather than “sexual objects.” The empathy scale outcomes were significantly improved as well, and all results were maintained at a one-year follow-up. No such effects were evident in the control condition. The implications for this research are staggering, given the individual, family, community, and societal toll child molestation takes on our collective souls, exponentially causing pain for generations.

Getting Past Your Past is a book for professionals and lay-people. It clarifies both the negative effects of early adverse life experiences, and how they may be successfully treated to bring the individual to a robust state of mental health. For many, it will be a life-saving read. ❖

References

1. Shapiro F. *Getting past your past: take control of your life with self-help techniques from EMDR therapy*. New York: Rodale Books; 2012.
2. Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, et al. Relationship of adult health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction. *Am J Prev Med* 1998 May;14(4):245-58. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
3. de Roos C, Veenstra AC, de Jongh A, et al. Treatment of chronic phantom limb pain using a trauma-focused psychological approach. *Pain Res Manag* 2010 Mar-Apr;15(2):65-71.
4. Ricci RJ, Clayton CA, Shapiro F. Some effects of EMDR on previously abused child molesters: Theoretical reviews and preliminary findings. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 2006 Dec;17(4):538-62.