

# **Chapter 5**

## **EMDR Is Not a Magic Wand**

Prior to training in EMDR therapy, most therapists had little prior experience with transformational trauma therapies. Throughout this book, transformational trauma therapies are defined as any approach that has a likelihood of fully and permanently resolving a target memory in a session or two. Many therapists (although certainly not all) observed their practicum partners during EMDR training resolve memories in ways that were astonishing. They may have experienced this themselves in the client role. Many first-time EMDR clients describe the process as magical. Getting past something is certainly novel and is itself a remarkable and disconfirming experience for many people.

### **The Bilateral Stimulation Is Not a Magic Wand**

Much of the historical focus on EMDR therapy has been on its most culturally “weird” component: the bilateral stimulation, which is often performed in the form of left-right eye movements. Practitioners discovered soon after EMDR’s development that many other forms of left-right stimulation are also effective in EMDR therapy, although the bilateral stimulation component remains its most distinctive and culturally weird feature. Some therapists assume that the active ingredient in EMDR therapy is the left-right stimulation, as though bilateral stimulation alone is inherently healing. Clearly, it is not. Otherwise, drummers would be the healthiest people on the planet. The history of rock-and-roll provides a compelling refutation of that assertion.

EMDR therapy consists of three core components: activation of a part of specific memory content, deep present-based noticing of the content that emerges, and while the client is engaging in left-right stimulation. I think of these components as three wheels of the tricycle of EMDR therapy, with the big front wheel being present-based noticing, since that is the component with the most contact and expenditure of effort. We

need all three wheels for the tricycle to roll effectively. It makes no more sense to describe the rear right wheel as more central to the workings of EMDR than any of the other essential elements. Again, it takes all three. We will return later to the tricycle metaphor of EMDR therapy as a lens for exploring the problems that may emerge in this psychotherapy by exploring its discrete components.

## If EMDR Is a Magic Wand, But It Does Not Work in My Hand

Many new EMDR therapists with a magic wand perspective encounter sessions where the opposite of magic occurs. The client may encounter real and intolerable distress that resists management and in ways that may scare both the client and the therapist. As is common in many bad relationships with a person or an idea, when an interaction goes sour we may conclude that we did something wrong or maybe that the magic wand does not work only when held in our hands. We did not get into this work to cause harm, yet the distressing fire that the client experienced in and after the session clearly traces back to the match in the therapist's hand. The advantage of removing magic from the equation in EMDR therapy is that we are not responsible for either its presence or its absence. Centering what is amazing and what is challenging in EMDR therapy inside the client's own complex and unique nervous system allows us to learn the lesson it needs to communicate. This learning allows us to make sensible adjustments to help our clients do this work in more productive and tolerable ways.