

# Chapter 31

## What Does Prepared Enough Mean?

A common consultation question is, “How do I know when a particular client is prepared enough to start the processing phases of EMDR therapy?”

My response is often, “Prepared enough to start where?” Very few clients with extreme trauma will be prepared enough to start with the earliest or worst traumatic experiences first, even with extensive preparation. We may need to work on smaller memories first in order to help build enough of the adaptive information needed to tackle the heftiest ones later in treatment. From the perspective of the boat metaphor, catching smaller fish first allows clients to develop what will be needed to handle the larger ones effectively. Also, catching smaller fish generates the assets we need to have a bigger boat.

### How Do We Know When Clients Are Prepared to Start Somewhere?

It is difficult to know for sure when clients are prepared enough to start the EMDR therapy reprocessing phases. It is important to allow people to start reprocessing if they are equipped for the journey. However, we don't want the preparation phases to be like a height line necessary to ride a ride at the county fair. It's easy to endlessly declare clients with complex trauma “not ready” for the reprocessing phases. Our job is to help the client develop what is needed for them to be prepared for the tasks of EMDR therapy. The following sections itemize the minimum requirements that I consider when deciding if the client is prepared to start reprocessing somewhere.

#### **The Client Understands EMDR Therapy Well Enough to Give Consent**

EMDR therapy often requires that clients sit for long periods with substantial distress. Most clients process this distress somatically by slowing down, being present with it, and noticing it deeply. This is a

difficult task for people who may have survived their trauma by staying ahead of it, not slowing down, avoiding, and not noticing. Clients who do EMDR therapy well understand fully what they are getting into, and they understand how to, and are prepared to do their job in this dance well. It is helpful to walk clients with complex trauma through the protocol, so that they understand the elements of this approach. Clients may come to therapy seeking EMDR, but it is important to try to understand what they think EMDR therapy is, how it is conducted, and their sense of what is required of them. EMDR therapy for complex trauma needs to be built around the understanding that recovering from complex trauma will not happen quickly, effortlessly, and without any risk.

Does the client understand that EMDR therapy involves activating a piece of a difficult experience, slowing down, and noticing deeply the right-now impact of that activation on the nervous system? Preparing the client to do EMDR therapy prepares them to do the core tasks required by this therapy. Does the client understand that doing almost anything other than what I am asking her to do is very likely to cause problems inside reprocessing? The client should understand what EMDR therapy is and should clearly understand that EMDR therapy is not any of the following:

- A think-think session where the client ruminates about the memory the same way they do outside of an EMDR therapy session.
- An opportunity to try to resolve the whole theme or other clusters of memory connected to the memory we are targeting.
- A chance to purposefully put the right thoughts in the correct order.
- A way to make sense of existential questions.
- A way to resolve a lifetime of trauma quickly and without distress.

### **The Client Needs to Feel Safe Enough in the Present**

EMDR therapy requires that clients have the capacity to activate a piece of memory, slow down, feel safe enough in the present moment to notice the distress that emerges and do these tasks for extended periods at a time. It is essential that therapists realize that a lot of what we are asking the client to do in Phase Two tests the client's capacity to slow down, feel safe enough in the present moment, and notice deeply current experience. For this reason, problems in Phase Two are strong warning signs for the reprocessing phases. If the therapist misses that the client is struggling to

slow down, connect with a sense of safety in the present, and stay grounded, the therapist may move the client into reprocessing phases and will encounter predictable and unfortunate results. If the client cannot slow down and connect with the present moment, that client is not prepared to do EMDR therapy currently. If the client cannot tolerably activate even a small difficult experience, that client is not prepared to do EMDR therapy at this moment. If simply noticing that he is in a human body that is breathing causes panic symptoms, that client is not ready for EMDR therapy today. We need to help the client develop the capacity to do the tasks that we are asking her to do in the reprocessing phases. If the client cannot do one of the core tasks, they are not prepared to engage in EMDR therapy. No task of EMDR therapy is more central than present-based noticing.

### **The Client Needs to Be Able to Regulate Activation on Purpose**

Trauma and trauma activation often push the client's gas pedal. Overactivation causes many difficulties in EMDR therapy, including pushing the needed adaptive information farther away. In order to do trauma work safely, clients need to have regulation strategies in place, and these resources need to reliably work when needed. Resources are the brake pedal. I will sometimes tell clients that EMDR therapy is a journey, but it wouldn't be wise for me to go across the street with them in a car that does not have a brake. I am not picky about which regulation strategies "work" for the client if these resources can be done in session reliably and effectively. Also, I anticipate that most mindfulness strategies will not make an 8/10 level of distress a 1/10 level of distress. It does not need to, nor would that feel safe with most clients with complex trauma. If a resource decreases activation some, then it is a good resource to use. I consider a resource rugged enough to use in sessions with clients with complex trauma if the resource has worked in session and the client can identify times outside of session when the resource was helpful in regulating distress. Many difficult things happen when the client overactivates in an EMDR session. Without adequate regulation strategies, these difficulties may directly impair the client's ability to do EMDR therapy well, effectively, and safely.

## **Is the Client Embodied Enough to Notice?**

EMDR therapy is a bottom-up psychotherapy. Is the client embodied enough to notice? If not, EMDR therapy is likely to be a goose chase. Often a quick Dip Your Toe In Body Scan can reveal how aware the client is of baseline distress. If they are not embodied enough to notice, we engage in exercises to help bring online body awareness. A client who is not embodied enough to notice may report no distress in parts of the body below the jaw despite complaints of frequent anxiety and panic symptoms. Emotions without body activation are often just thoughts about feelings.

## **Does the Client Have the Capacity to Feel Worse Today?**

EMDR therapy typically is a dive into distress. Clients need to have at least some capacity to feel worse today in order to engage in EMDR therapy effectively. Some clients will come to sessions without the energy needed to do reprocessing. For clients who come to the session on the edge of panic or who appear the most depressed I have ever seen them, therapy will likely involve interventions other than EMDR reprocessing to help them become more stable and less acutely distressed.

## **Does the Client Have Enough Adaptive Information for the Current Memory Territory?**

At its core EMDR therapy involves connecting old stuck information into right-now existing adaptive information. EMDR therapy does not create additional adaptive information simply because it is needed. Using the boat metaphor, the client will not get a bigger boat simply because he is connected to a large shark. He has the boat that he launched with today. The client must have enough of the needed adaptive information for the difficult information to link up to. It is important to understand that adaptive information is not one thing. The client may have adequate information in one domain but may have profound deficits in others. Again, it is helpful to work where there are discrepancies between what the client knows is true and how the memory feels in the present moment, i.e. “I know that kids are not responsible for what adults do to them, but when I think about that memory, I just feel so guilty.”