

Chapter 8

What Makes Complex Trauma So Complex for EMDR Therapy?

Volumes have been written about the complexity of trauma when it impacts multiple developmental eras and intersects core developmental needs. This section is about the relevance of complex trauma for the tasks specifically required to do EMDR therapy well. Returning to the Tricycle metaphor to describe the central features of EMDR therapy, activation is the rear left wheel, noticing the activation is the front center wheel, and left-right stimulation is the back right wheel.

Activation is a core task in most transformational trauma therapies. EMDR therapy is complicated by the large number of memories that will need to be processed. Figuring out where to start with clients with complex trauma can be a more complicated clinical task. It is wise to start work at the intersection of what is productive and what is tolerable. Also, clients with complex trauma will need to be able to activate a part of a difficult memory. Some clients are too shut down to activate. Others may have blocking beliefs related to emotional expression, which may directly impact their capacity to activate. We need distress to come, but it needs to come in discrete chunks small enough for the client's current window of tolerance and should be tolerable enough for the client to notice in the present. The memory content should not come into awareness faster or with more intensity than clients can notice. Also, the memory content needs to be at least somewhat limited to prevent a large number of adjacent memories from coming into awareness. Because EMDR therapy encourages distress to form and sit in the body, the familiarity of the body-based sensations can cause adjacent memories to want to come into awareness resulting in many memories coming into awareness at a rate faster than the client can metabolize any of them.

In general, clients will most commonly struggle in EMDR therapy when memory content comes into awareness at a rate or intensity faster than they can notice and digest. Content and distress do not want to come in modest pieces with clients with complex trauma. Their nervous system wants to swing out into the deep end of it.

In many ways, noticing is the bright yellow line in the center of the EMDR road. Noticing requires the capacity to slow down and be present.

Slowing down is particularly complicated for people whose core survival strategy has been to stay ahead of it. Present awareness is very difficult for many clients with complex trauma because the present is where everything bad happens. Asking clients with complex trauma to slow down, be present, and notice in an activated state is to ask them to engage in a trifecta of triggering.

We are always connecting difficult information to other, more adaptive information that is present somewhere in the client's system in EMDR therapy. Clients with complex trauma typically have large amounts of difficult experiences, but very little adaptive information for the difficult experiences to connect with and metabolize into. We cannot connect a lie to a lie and we cannot metabolize difficult information into nothing. The information necessary for healing needs to be already present in the client. If it isn't, we need to help clients develop it. Our interventions should help the client have experiences in session and between sessions that help build or support adaptive information.