

Chapter 32

The Utility of Informed Consent

It is possible for clients to be harmed by EMDR therapy if they do not expect that difficulties may appear and do not have a clear plan and resources in place to manage those difficulties. Challenges in EMDR therapy are not limited to the processing phases. Difficulties can emerge and cause trauma responses in Phase One and Two.

Clients with complex trauma will need to be able to consent to the work that they do, and we will need to provide clear information about each step. Their parts will need to consent to the work that we are asking them to do. It is important to explore the risks of doing this work and also the risks of not doing this work. Often the risks of not healing are substantial and life-long. Part of what is unique about our professions is that we see and understand the past, present, and future risks and consequences of not healing from complex trauma.

Asking for consent at every phase of EMDR therapy allows the client's parts to collaborate and for client concerns related to a resource or a target to appear prior to engagement with it. Clients may be more willing to engage in difficult work if they know that their therapist values consent and that the therapist is able to effectively manage the concerns and agendas of parts of themselves. In order to give consent, clients need to understand what we will ask them to do and why.

For resources, it can be helpful to describe the resource to the client before engaging in it. This allows the client to describe their concerns about this resource. If the client communicates that exercises like this do not work for him, we can explore how we might be able to do the resource differently enough from previous times for it to be worth the experiment.

For the processing phases, it is helpful to walk the client through the Phase Three-Seven script so that we are able to explain what we will be asking them to do and why. EMDR therapy is a dance, and a client that is well educated about what is coming and how to do those tasks may allow them to do them well. A client that is well informed about their role in the dance may make it less likely that they will also try to do my role as therapist in the dance.

As we are working with the client to select the memory at the beginning of Phase Three, the following quick question is very helpful: ***“Do all parts of you think working on this memory today is a good idea?”*** If so, continue. If not, see if any part has a resolvable concern, and then work with the parts to find a memory that feels safer or more tolerable for today.

A lot of wounding with clients with complex trauma has occurred in contexts absent consent. Consent is a core modern human value that is good to model in all contexts between two adult humans. Opening the door to consent opens the door to essential conversations and explorations that can make everything we are trying to accomplish easier and more equitable.

Being open to client consent means that sometimes therapy does not go exactly the way the therapist imagined. When consent feels like a tax, inefficiency, or burden for the therapist, the therapist should check for the presence of agenda, privilege, or power.