

# INPLASY

## Addressing Mental Health Need After COVID-19: A Systematic Review of Remote EMDR Therapy Studies as an Emerging Option

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### ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

**Support** - NA.

**Review Stage at time of this submission** - Completed but not published.

**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.

**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY2023120018

**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 04 December 2023 and was last updated on 04 December 2023.

### INTRODUCTION

**Review question / Objective** The aims of the study, as outlined in the passage, include: The study aimed to fill a notable gap in the existing literature by conducting a systematic review specifically focused on online Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy and interventions. The primary goal was to summarize the evidence for the effectiveness of online EMDR therapy. This involved gathering and analyzing information on the outcomes and efficacy of remote EMDR interventions. The study also aimed to contribute insights to the existing body of knowledge on mental health interventions, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally this review sought to provide information that can be beneficial for practitioners and researchers in the field of mental health. This

included information on the feasibility and effectiveness of online EMDR therapy.

**Rationale** This study was motivated by the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. The pandemic has been associated with a significant rise in mental health difficulties, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression. Importantly, individuals reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression have been found to be more susceptible to severe COVID-19 outcomes.

The mental health challenges induced by the pandemic are diverse, encompassing factors such as isolation, financial instability, grief, suicide, and substance use. The repercussions persist, leading to fatigue, cognitive impairments, and ongoing mental health difficulties, even in post-infection cases. Certain demographic groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, displaced individuals,

those facing financial insecurity, children, people with disabilities, and those with preexisting conditions, are identified as facing heightened risks. Crucially, essential workers, due to the increased risk associated with their roles, have experienced worsened mental health. The global surge in mental health difficulties during the pandemic is juxtaposed with limited access to mental health services and resources. Lockdowns and the prioritization of other health services have led to decreased access to outpatient mental health care and reduced admissions.

In response to these challenges, there has been a notable shift towards remote mental health services, leveraging digital technologies. This included the adoption of teletherapy, mobile health applications, and web-based interventions. Against this backdrop, the study focuses on Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, a psychotherapeutic approach targeting distress associated with traumatic memories.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the widespread popularity of online EMDR therapy. Recognizing this trend, various EMDR organizations have issued guidelines, emphasizing the need for specific recommendations regarding security, therapeutic considerations, and client selection in the online context. Qualitative studies have explored the feasibility and accessibility of online EMDR therapy, with therapists expressing increasing comfort with this mode of delivery.

Despite the surge in popularity, the effectiveness of online EMDR therapy was not well-established in the existing literature. Prior systematic reviews have predominantly focused on face-to-face applications, leaving a notable gap in understanding the efficacy of online EMDR therapy. Thus, this study aimed to fill this gap by conducting a systematic review that specifically addresses remote EMDR programs, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of mental health interventions during and beyond the pandemic.

**Condition being studied** The review discusses the broader context of mental health difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Conditions such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, addictions, and other distressing life experiences were mentioned in relation to the potential effectiveness of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy.

The primary focus of the study was the overall mental health impact of the pandemic and how EMDR therapy, particularly when delivered online, may address these conditions. The review aimed

to contribute to the understanding of the effectiveness of online EMDR therapy in managing mental health challenges.

## METHODS

**Search strategy** Search: (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)) AND (remote OR online OR web-based)

("eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[MeSH Terms] OR ("eye"[All Fields] AND "movement"[All Fields] AND "desensitization"[All Fields] AND "reprocessing"[All Fields]) OR "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[All Fields] OR "eye movement desensitization and reprocessing"[All Fields]) AND ("eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[MeSH Terms] OR ("eye"[All Fields] AND "movement"[All Fields] AND "desensitization"[All Fields] AND "reprocessing"[All Fields]) OR "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[All Fields] OR "emdr"[All Fields]) AND ("remote"[All Fields] OR "remotely"[All Fields] OR "remoteness"[All Fields] OR "remotes"[All Fields] OR "online"[All Fields] OR "web-based"[All Fields])

Translations

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing: "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[MeSH Terms] OR ("eye"[All Fields] AND "movement"[All Fields] AND "desensitization"[All Fields] AND "reprocessing"[All Fields]) OR "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[All Fields] OR "eye movement desensitization and reprocessing"[All Fields]

EMDR: "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[MeSH Terms] OR ("eye"[All Fields] AND "movement"[All Fields] AND "desensitization"[All Fields] AND "reprocessing"[All Fields]) OR "eye movement desensitization reprocessing"[All Fields] OR "emdr"[All Fields]  
remote: "remote"[All Fields] OR "remotely"[All Fields] OR "remoteness"[All Fields] OR "remotes"[All Fields].

**Participant or population** No limitation was set for gender or ethnicity, or age or any other health status. It was not necessary that participants must have mental health problems, as some studies might evaluate the impact of the intervention on functionality or general wellbeing. No limitation was set for gender or ethnicity, or age or any other health status. It was not necessary that participants must have mental health problems, as some studies might evaluate the impact of the intervention on functionality or general wellbeing. Adults, adolescents and children.

**Intervention** The primary intervention being evaluated in the review is online Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. EMDR is a psychotherapeutic approach designed to alleviate distress associated with traumatic memories. The therapy involves attention to three time periods: the past, present, and future, with a focus on past disturbing memories and related events. EMDR therapy is described as an eight-phase treatment that includes the use of eye movements or other bilateral stimulation during one part of the session. The review aims to assess the effectiveness of EMDR therapy when delivered remotely through online platforms. This includes evaluating how well online EMDR therapy addresses various mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, chronic pain, addictions, and other distressing life experiences. The passage highlights the increased popularity of online EMDR therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic and the issuance of guidelines by EMDR organizations to ensure the secure and effective delivery of this intervention in an online format. The focus on online EMDR therapy suggests an interest in understanding its feasibility, accessibility, and effectiveness, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the pandemic and the shift towards digital mental health services.

**Comparator** Studies to be included if they did, or did not have a control or comparator group. Control or comparator groups can include: treatment as usual, waiting list, any active control design, psychological therapy, other types of intervention or medication.

**Study designs to be included** We included all types of studies in which EMDR Protocol was delivered if the study investigates the effect of Group EMDR intervention on any mental health problems. This could include: Randomized controlled design (RCT), non-randomised controlled study (NRS) designs, case series design, case studies design among others.

**Eligibility criteria** The eligibility criteria for studies included in the review are as follows: Inclusion Criteria: Studies assessing the efficacy of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR sessions delivered online. Employ at least one standardized outcome measure that assesses mental health difficulties. Trials with or without a control group are considered. No restrictions based on publication date, study design, setting, age, or gender. Studies must be in English. Exclusion Criteria: Studies that do not present primary quantitative findings on the

effectiveness of EMDR in peer-reviewed publications, such as reviews, books, conference abstracts, or posters. Studies that combine EMDR with other therapies or interventions without providing appropriate statistical differentiation of EMDR effects. The inclusion criteria were not restricted based on publication date, study design, setting, age, gender, or publication status, except for requiring the studies to be in English. However, studies that did not present primary quantitative findings on the effectiveness of EMDR in peer-reviewed publications, such as reviews, books, conference abstracts, or posters.

**Information sources** PsychINFO, EMBASE, MEDLINE, and Web of Science. Additionally, the Francine Shapiro Library the Journal of EMDR Practice and Research.

**Main outcome(s)** A narrative synthesis of the efficiency of EMDR protocols for a range of mental health difficulties. This review additionally provided synthesis of possible acceptability indicators for example drop out rate for different problems and population. Pre and post-intervention. We considered also follow-up measures, if present.

#### **Additional outcome(s)**

- Title of study
- Authors
- Publication date
- Study design, setting and type of comparator (waiting list, treatment as usual, psychological therapy, medication, other)
- Sample details including socio-demographical characteristics including;
  - Sample size
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Ethnicity
  - Education level
  - Mental health diagnosis
- Recruitment method
- Measures used
- Type of EMDR protocol used
- Statistical information
  - Analysis method
  - Significance level
  - Fidelity
  - Follow up period
  - Drop out rate
  - Pre and post scores
  - Details of sessions (number and length of sessions)
  - Characteristics of facilitator (profession facilitator, level of qualification and availability of supervision)
  - Availability of interpreter

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- Outcome assessed
  - Any mental health difficulty
  - Self-harm/ suicidal ideation
  - Substance abuse
  - Traumatic experiences
  - Subjective Units of Disturbance
  - Validity of Cognition
  - Any functioning outcome.

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**Data management** The PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) was used when conducting and documenting the review. Moreover bibliographic management softwares were used to manage references and citations.

#### **Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis**

- Cochrane Risk Of Bias Tool for Randomized Trials (RoB 2)
- Cochrane Risk Of Bias In Non-Randomized Studies – of Interventions (ROBINS-I).

**Strategy of data synthesis** A narrative synthesis was to summarize the findings of the application of EMDR therapy. The synthesised data was structured around the different delivery methods, protocol and sample characteristics.

Extracted data from studies including study design, type of EMDR protocol, duration of intervention, characteristics of facilitator, findings etc. analysed using a systematic narrative synthesis, where the data presented in summary tables with descriptive text.

**Subgroup analysis** When sufficient studies were available for subgroup analyses for a mental health problem, we conducted subgroup analysis based on types of participants (children versus adults) and the different delivery methods.

**Sensitivity analysis** Due to high heterogeneity between studies we did not conduct a meta-analysis to examine the effectiveness of the interventions on mental health problems.

**Language restriction** English.

**Country(ies) involved** Turkey.

**Keywords** EMDR therapy, online therapy, mental health, online EMDR, remote EMDR, self-help.

**Dissemination plans** The findings will be disseminated as a scientific journal article and or through scientific conference presentations.

#### **Contributions of each author**

Author 1 - SAFA KEMAL KAPTAN.