

# EDITORIAL

## EMDR Therapy: To Call Out Is to Strengthen

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In 2020, Harik, Grubbs, and Hamblen published an article in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (JTS) aiming to show that the format in which treatment information is presented impacts individuals' preferences for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatments. The authors presented their method as involving the unbiased description of various evidence-based PTSD treatments, which included EMDR therapy, cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, stress inoculation training, and antidepressant medication. These descriptions were not provided within the paper itself, but were rather available as supplemental material on the journal's website. Despite the stated endeavor of neutrality, the description of EMDR therapy was outlined less favorably than other empirically supported trauma interventions, and included the following statement: "Some experts believe that the side to side eye movements in EMDR are important. Other experts believe that the eye movements are not important, and that EMDR works by using ideas from other treatments (like cognitive-behavioral therapies)" (Harik et al., 2020, supplemental material, p. 3).

EMDR therapy was the only treatment outlined in a pejorative manner, whereas the three other psychotherapies' descriptions highlighted the development of new skills and abilities.

Our colleague Howard Lipke pursued this matter with the authors and with the Editor of JTS, pinpointing several problems with the study, particularly regarding EMDR therapy. The Editor of JTS invited a commentary by Lipke; however, before the commentary could be published, the JTS accepted the authors' request to retract their paper. The retraction notice states that "The authors asked to retract this manuscript because, subsequent to publication, they discovered that the survey administered to participants

confounded differences in content and format, which does not allow valid interpretations of the effects tested" (Harik et al., 2022).

Of course, this means that the negative description of EMDR therapy has not been specifically addressed or acknowledged.

In a similar vein, in March 2022, the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy's (BAPC) flagship magazine *Therapy Today* (with a readership which stands at over 60,000) published an article by Wotton and Johnston titled, "We need more faith that therapy works." The paper considers the "faddishness" that exists within counselling and psychotherapy, and states that

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR) invites clients to focus on traumatic memories while simultaneously moving their eyes from side to side. Proponents of the treatment argue that bilateral eye movement stimulation while thinking about the traumatic memory somehow changes the way that the memory is stored in the brain, and thereby reduces or eliminates distress. However, long-standing criticisms of EMDR have now settled into an academic consensus that eye movements are unnecessary, and that the effect obtained is solely the result of exposure, a technique borrowed from CBT ... EMDR works better than doing nothing and is probably better than just supportive listening ... EMDR is actually a form of CBT by another name, albeit in slightly less effective form. (Wotton & Johnston, 2022, p. 28)

It is hard to imagine any EMDR therapist or researcher concurring with this argument.

So, why are these two articles important? They are important for several reasons; firstly, integrity

in science and research is essential, as are balance and fairness. Of course, criticality and debate are equally important, but robust research should be consistent in the way it addresses its primary comparators. Secondly, both these articles breed disinformation and misrepresentation, which, for the public, must be highly confusing. Thirdly, the efficacy of psychotherapies should be based upon the science and academic literature, rather than subjective opinion.

The Harik et al. (2020) paper appeared in the JTS, which is published by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS), and consequently not only has significant reach, but also important political influence in defining international treatment guidelines for PTSD and complex PTSD. The retraction was sought by the authors, not the Editor.

To be clear, the Harik et al. (2020) paper is a strange one, where fundamental norms were repeatedly transgressed, scientific rigor and methodology compromised, and the study's findings discredited. Furthermore, the opportunity to redress the specific aspects related to EMDR therapy has not been addressed.

The *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* supports the decision for retraction, but considers that JTS could do more to provide opportunity to remedy the reputational damage and stated inaccuracies of the description of EMDR therapy. Indeed, the paper was available in the public domain for 2 years before the retraction.

It is fair to acknowledge that research is just another form of politics. Any psychotherapeutic approach worth its salt should always be able to withstand robust scrutiny and critical appraisal. Both the Harik et al. (2020) and the Wotton and Johnston (2022) articles will not be the last in espousing poorly constructed arguments and questionable scholarly output; therefore, vigilance and robust challenge are required to “call out” disputable academic standards and rigor. The way to challenge this is to continue with good quality research so that future narratives are empirically based and not subjective opinion.

## References

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