

The WAGER, Vol. 2(40) - Treating pathological gambling with eye movement desensitization/reprocessing

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Eye movement desensitization/reprocessing (EMDR) is a relatively new treatment* that has produced beneficial results for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety complaints. EMDR is a clinical treatment method developed to stimulate central nervous system information processing which has been disrupted by trauma experiences. A recent study** tested whether EMDR was an effective treatment for decreasing gambling events among pathological gamblers. A gambling event was considered to be each separate gambling activity (i.e., buying a lottery ticket, a session of video poker). Pathological gamblers were hypothesized to be viable candidates for EMDR treatment because of the potential existence of unresolved trauma-related anxiety which may drive pathological gambling behavior. That is, pathological gambling may be a way for anxious individuals to cope with and try to control their anxiety. Nineteen clients who met DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling and reported trauma histories appropriate for EMDR treatment were non-randomly classified into the EMDR treatment group or a control group. There were no significant differences in mean frequency of gambling events between the two groups pre-intervention. The EMDR-treatment group received psychotherapy before and after their treatment; control subjects received psychotherapy while they were on a wait list for EMDR treatment. The EMDR treatment targeted life events, not gambling-specific events. This study found that among pathological gamblers, EMDR was effective in significantly decreasing the mean frequency of gambling events. In addition, EMDR was significantly more effective in reducing frequency of gambling events than standard psychotherapy. EMDR was more effective among clients who had trauma histories. This study's author suggests that these preliminary findings support an anxiety-based etiological model for gambling disorders. While EMDR treatment for pathological gambling needs to be further researched, alternative explanations for these findings must be considered. Particularly, the variability of time in therapy pre-EMDR in this study may

indicate that simply staying in treatment longer and being committed to change may be driving the successful treatment outcome.

Sources: *Shapiro, F. (1995). Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. New York: Guilford Press; **Henry, S.L. (1996). Pathological gambling: Etiologic considerations and treatment efficacy of eye movement desensitization/reprocessing. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 12 (4), 395-405.

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