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Original article

# Integrating positive psychology applications into the EMDR Peak Performance protocol

## *Les applications de la psychologie positive intégrées au protocole EMDR Peak performance*

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### ABSTRACT

*Introduction.* – This article describes an innovative Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) protocol which applies the standard EMDR protocol, with modifications, to the reduction of performance anxiety and enhancement of skillful performance in higher functioning clients.

*Objective.* – The intention was to compare a modified version of the standard EMDR protocol for the reduction of performance anxiety and the enhancement of performance.

*Method.* – The method was applying the special EMDR protocol for peak performance with higher functioning clients. A further enhancement applied three empirically valid techniques drawn from the subfield of positive psychology.

*Results.* – Published case studies suggest that this special EMDR protocol aided an experienced commercial pilot in overcoming his avoidance and returning to the flight simulator following a failed proficiency check, and assisted an executive in managing his sense of failure following a significant business setback. Athletes preparing for competition have also found the protocol assists them in managing precompetition anxiety. A further enhancement is the application of three techniques drawn from positive psychology which the empirical research in this subfield of psychology suggests can further enhance the benefits of this protocol.

*Conclusion.* – Limitations are discussed and recommendations for future research are outlined.

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### R É S U M É

Cet article décrit un protocole EMDR innovant issu de modifications apportés au protocole EMDR standard. Sa finalité est la diminution de l'anxiété dans les situations de réalisation de performance, ainsi que pour l'amélioration des compétences chez des clients possédant un haut niveau d'expertise dans des domaines variés.

Les études de cas publiées dans ce domaine montrent que ce protocole EMDR a, en particulier, permis à un pilote de ligne commercial expérimenté de surmonter sa peur et son appréhension à retourner sur un simulateur de vol après un échec lors d'une démarche d'évaluation de ses compétences. Ce dernier était assisté par un cadre supérieur qui a contribué à faciliter le processus de retour.

Des athlètes en phase de préparation à la compétition ont également pu, grâce à ce protocole, mieux gérer leur anxiété de pré-compétition. L'amélioration des effets observés du protocole EMDR Peak Performance, est également le résultat d'une intégration de trois approches développées par la psychologie positive qui renforcent les effets de la prise en charge et renforce les apports de l'EMDR. Les limites de ce type d'approche seront abordées, et des recommandations pour la recherche future sont également proposées.

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## 1. Introduction

This article describes an innovative Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) protocol, first developed in 1991, which applied the standard EMDR protocol, with modifications, to

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the reduction of performance anxiety and enhancement of skillful performance in higher functioning clients. The purpose of this new protocol was to explore whether EMDR, developed for treating trauma, could be utilized by clients wishing to optimize their performance at work, in sport, and in the creative and performing arts. This article briefly outlines this special EMDR protocol and also sets out the rationale for a further enhancement: the application of three techniques drawn from positive psychology. This subfield of psychology is focused on the science of happiness and excellence and how people in many different situations, including those in psychotherapy, can leverage their extant strengths such as courage or gratitude, focus on positive attributes when facing challenges or attempting to reach goals, and best deploy their skills in an actual competition or high stakes performance.

## 2. Literature findings

The author co-created the EMDR Peak Performance protocol (Foster and Lendl, 1995) with the intention of helping clients build upon their current behavioral repertoires and overcome “performance deficits”, thus being able to effectively deploy an existing skill that had previously been inhibited by performance anxiety or other blocks. Case studies (Foster and Lendl, 1996) suggested that the EMDR Peak Performance protocol aided an experienced commercial pilot in overcoming his avoidance and returning to the flight simulator following a failed proficiency check, and assisted an executive in managing his distress and sense of failure following a significant business setback.

### 2.1. The EMDR Standard protocol

The developer of EMDR, Francine Shapiro (2001), describes the foundation of EMDR treatment as the Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) model. “With the exception of organic insult or deficits, chronic dysfunctional perceptions, responses, attitudes, self-concept, and personality traits are all symptoms of unprocessed memories. According to this model, a high level of disturbance at the time of an event causes the information processing system to fail to properly assimilate the experience into the normal, comprehensive memory networks. As a result, these unprocessed memories are stored in isolation, and contain the affects, thoughts, sensations, and behavioral responses that were encoded at the time of the event. The primary aim of EMDR treatment is to target the dysfunctional memories that are triggered by the client’s current life conditions, and transmute them into functional ones by harnessing the natural neural processes of memory consolidation”.

The standard EMDR protocol has been shown to be efficacious for treating PTSD (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009), the trauma following rape (Rothbaum, 1997), conduct disorders in young adult males (Soberman et al., 2002) and combat trauma (Carlson et al., 1998). The American Psychiatric Association (2004) listed EMDR as an effective treatment for acute stress disorder and PTSD in its practice guidelines. Of particular relevance to this article, there is one published study utilizing the standard EMDR protocol to treat test anxiety by processing early events associated with the current distress (Maxfield and Melnyk, 2000).

### 2.2. The EMDR Peak Performance protocol

The EMDR Peak Performance protocol was originally created for use with higher functioning clients in business, performing arts and sport. A second application focused on helping trauma survivors become more fully functioning or “better performers” in their daily lives. This special protocol has been deployed with encouraging results when focused on working through performance anxiety (Ricci et al., 2009), and taking a high functioning client’s skill

set from “good” to “great” (Foster and Lendl, 1995, 1996; Lendl and Foster, 2009). It is important to note that this special protocol remains faithful to the steps in the standard EMDR protocol with two primary differences. The first difference is the focus is on enhancing present-day performance issues while preparing for optimal future performance. Therefore, the starting point is a present-day target rather than selecting a past event target, i.e., the first or worst past instance of a trauma. The second key difference is that during the preparation phase preceding the processing, Resource Development and Installation (RDI) is oriented toward peace of mind and then toward the possibility of developing a full, satisfying life rather than patient safety.

RDI (Leeds, 2009) is a crucial element of the EMDR Peak Performance protocol’s phase two. In the standard EMDR protocol, RDI can be helpful with patients trying to cope with past trauma. In such clinical applications of EMDR, RDI emphasizes safety, client stabilization, and ego strengthening. In peak performance applications, resource installation is oriented toward empowerment and the generation of hope and possibility, including the realization of cherished goals. Moreover, optimal deployment of skills is a crucial part of the work with the client.

The EMDR Peak Performance protocol is also informed by the use of sport psychology performance enhancement techniques, including goal setting, managing arousal levels, and imagining desired future states. The EMDR Peak Performance protocol incorporates between-session homework assignments focused on acquiring the requisite skills and rehearsal in vivo before demonstrating the performance in front of the “audience”, i.e., the group observing the client’s behavior in the real-life setting, whether the sport field, stage, meeting room at work, or other performance venue. An example of rehearsal in vivo would be a client receiving feedback from an experienced speaker regarding the client’s practice speech, given in the organization’s auditorium to a small group of colleagues who served as the “audience”.

A crucial element in the Preparation Phase of the EMDR Peak Performance protocol is identifying and assessing whether the requisite skills are present in the client’s repertoire and supporting her in acquiring missing behavioral capabilities. For example, a client experiencing performance anxiety when conducting business meetings can enlist trusted colleagues as mentors to enhance her skills in communicating in a clear and compelling manner, and helping her learn to effectively facilitating meetings so that the team’s goals are clearly articulated and agreement on objectives is achieved. If the client is worried and feeling distressed about enacting skills that she does not currently possess, attempts to reprocess the anxiety will not be fully successful.

In providing EMDR Peak Performance work, a practitioner may encounter a client whose “false self” or narcissistic self-appraisal (Masterson, 1981) are challenged in the workplace or on the stage. A crisis of confidence may be precipitated by a business loss, the fear of being exposed as an impostor, or an audition that went badly. One of the useful positive cognitions in the EMDR Peak Performance protocol is based on a shift to a new perspective of “I am informing rather than performing”. This refers to providing perspectives and data to one’s colleagues at work for the benefit of the organization instead of seeking approval from the boss. A second useful positive cognition is “I will find my right audience”, meaning to share one’s musical, acting or artistic talent with those who are appreciative rather than striving to appeal to “everyone”.

This shift allows the client to more capably manage the anxiety and distress associated with needing others’ approval. Once the symptoms of the performance anxiety have been reprocessed, clients can better imagine experiencing satisfaction as a result of making a contribution, or expressing themselves while grounded in a sense of purpose, or working cooperatively with one’s team rather than competing with them.

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