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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.

Philosophically, the EMDR Peak Performance protocol emphasizes what the client can do now and optimizing that performance, with self-actualization as his or her goal. This special protocol draws upon the writings of Maslow (1971) and others from the Human Potential Movement.

What may further augment this special protocol's efficacy is the integration of positive psychology techniques. In numerous research studies, positive psychology interventions have been found to be efficacious in enhancing physical well-being (Cohen et al., 2003; Davidson et al., 2010), in prompting a broader and even more creative view when problem solving, and helpful in mitigating the adverse impact of negative emotions (Tugade et al., 2004).

2.3. Positive psychology techniques that can be integrated into the EMDR Peak Performance protocol

Martin Seligman, as 1998 President of the American Psychological Association, called for a “new direction in the research and practice of psychology, with renewed emphasis on clarifying and nurturing the human strengths”. Labeled positive psychology, its aim was to “catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Barbara Fredrickson, one of the core researchers in positive psychology, has investigated the impact of positive emotional experiences on strengthening emotional resources. She has developed a framework based upon what she calls the “broaden and build theory of positive emotions”. . . . She comments that “this theory states that certain discrete emotions including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love. . . share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). Further studies (Fredrickson, 2001, 2009; Fredrickson and Cohn, 2009; Losada and Heaphy, 2004) suggest that experiencing positive emotions helps people attend to a task and think in a more flexible and integrative way, thereby increasing the chances that their solutions and conclusions will be more creative.

As a practitioner of EMDR and early adopter of positive psychology methods in a coaching context, the author saw the possibility of a paradigm shift even beyond applying EMDR, a trauma treatment, to reducing performance anxiety and enhancing performance. She reasoned that empirically valid techniques drawn from positive psychology could augment the beneficial impact of the EMDR Peak Performance protocol.

The author has explored the integration of three specific positive psychology techniques into the EMDR Peak Performance protocol:

- identifying individual strengths (Seligman, 2002) that can be deployed in times of challenge;
- using the Appreciative Inquiry method (Cooperrider, 1995) for noticing first what is working well in the client's life as a way of “energizing” his sense of possibility;
- and assisting the client in identifying positive words to help trigger positive emotional states (Fredrickson, 2001).

Anecdotal evidence (clients' self-reports) is promising but controlled studies are needed to examine the benefit of amplifying the EMDR Peak Performance protocol with these techniques, and potentially others drawn from positive psychology.

Also noteworthy is the empirical evidence for the efficacy of so-called “positive psychotherapy”, which applies specific positive psychology techniques to a basic treatment approach (such as therapist warmth and rapport, accurate empathy) for depressed

adults (Seligman et al., 2006) and for children and teens (Rashid and Anjum, 2007).

2.4. Case example of the EMDR Peak Performance protocol

As an example, a higher functioning client wishes to focus on becoming more proficient in interacting with his team and with customers at work. He reports feeling inhibited from speaking up in meetings and reluctant to seek more challenging assignments leading to greater pay, bonuses and the likelihood of being promoted. The practitioner has assessed for past trauma, other psychiatric conditions, the presence of secondary issues and dual diagnosis, and his general state of emotional and physical health, and has determined that the EMDR Peak Performance protocol is appropriate for this client. This assumption rests on the client's current status as someone functioning reasonably well but with the desire to behave more competently with peers and superiors. In cases where a client presents with unprocessed past trauma, the author recommends that the EMDR Standard protocol be used first, commencing with a past target. When the old trauma has been sufficiently processed, the EMDR Peak Performance protocol can then be utilized to focus on the client's present and future performance at work or in another performance venue, using a present-day target.

With this example, the initial target is a present-day issue – the client's desire to interact more effectively with his boss and coworkers. The practitioner then assists the client in identifying other present-day targets, and helps the client explore past events and dynamics that might potentially block progress toward achieving his goal. During this preparation, the practitioner advises the client to bear in mind that past material may emerge even when commencing the processing using a present-day target.

The practitioner then proceeds with RDI:

- the client identifies a place where he feels at peace, similar to the installation of the safe place in the standard EMDR protocol;
- the practitioner then assists the client in identifying his inner coach using this instruction: “Think of someone, real or imagined, whose support and encouragement would be of value to you whenever you need it. Imagine this inner coach speaking to you, using just the right words to help you when you need it. Notice the positive feeling associated with this inner coach”;
- success review – the practitioner guides the client in recalling a time when he felt effective and competent and able to perform in a way that was satisfying and led to achievement of work objectives or other performance goals. The practitioner uses the following instruction: “Think back to the times when you felt more powerful/in control/satisfied with your results at the end of the day. Concentrate on the positive feeling this memory brings up for you”. Each of these resources is installed with 1–2 short sets of eye movements (8–10 saccades) or other form of bilateral stimulation (BLS).

During the processing, this client recalled an incident with a former boss who had ridiculed him in front of the team. The client had subsequently attempted to avoid meetings when he could and when he had to attend, felt anxious, “out of place” and unwilling to offer his views.

As the processing continued, the client realized his current situation was different from the past incident with his boss. He saw that, with his current more supportive boss, he had an opportunity to explore becoming a more active contributor to his team. He came to another realization that there were situations at work where he could enhance his current skill set and came to the conclusion that he would ask a more senior member of his team to “shadow” him in meetings with clients.

In one initial 90-minute and five 60-minute sessions of present-day and future focused targeted processing, this higher functioning client felt he had come to understand how this past incident had been blocking him. He realized that he had felt inhibited from actualizing his desire to develop himself in his current role and to proactively pursue ways to more skillfully interact with his peers and the organization's clients. This client was someone who would not have sought therapy in order to break free of inhibitions blocking him from seeking greater competence and satisfaction on the job. He was able, however, to benefit from the EMDR Peak Performance protocol, as measured by his willingness to pursue a promotion after consistently speaking up more in meetings and accompanying his new mentor on visits to clients.

2.5. Integrating positive psychology techniques in phase two

2.5.1. Identification of strengths that can be leveraged

This technique introduces the values in action inventory [VIA] (Peterson and Seligman, 2002, 2004) to a client as a way of commencing the EMDR processing with the client focused upon his strengths. One means for identifying strengths is to use this inventory which is available free of charge on the internet and was developed by Martin Seligman and his colleague, Chris Peterson. (The URL appears in the reference list.) Alternatively, a written list of the six virtues and their component character strengths are given to the client as a way of identifying strengths. In either case, the client is asked the following questions: "Which one of the strengths is a positive characteristic that you currently possess?"

From whom did you learn this strength? or How did you acquire this strength?

Who is a role-model at work (or in another meaningful domain in your life) who currently exhibits this strength in his or her actions? Please describe how in detail.

How can you deploy this strength when you face the challenging situation?

Think of a particularly challenging situation in your workplace (or other performance domain in your life). What could you begin doing this week to demonstrate this strength in meeting this challenge? What might be the result of regularly practicing this strength at work (or other performance domain in your life)?

What sort of image or other sensory anchor could you employ to reinforce your use of this strength while at work (or other performance domain in your life)?"

The six virtues and their component character strengths (from the VIA):

- wisdom and knowledge: creativity curiosity open-mindedness love of learning perspective;
- courage: bravery persistence integrity vitality;
- humanity: the capacity to love and be loved kindness social intelligence, particularly empathy;
- justice: citizenship fairness leadership;
- temperance: forgiveness humility prudence self-regulation;
- transcendence: appreciation of beauty gratitude hope sense of humor spirituality.

2.5.2. Using the appreciative inquiry technique

The practitioner guides the client in noticing first what is working well in the client's life using the following instruction: "Think of your positive attributes, personal qualities and those things you do well. Make a list of what in your life is working right now".

2.5.3. Generating more positive states by identifying positive words

The practitioner then facilitates the client's identification of positive words that can help him trigger the experience of positive

emotions. Research results suggest that such words leading to positive emotions help the client remain calmer and allow him to move more quickly to positive action when negative emotions and other distress are occurring (Fredrickson, 2001).

3. Discussion – Conclusion

Preliminary studies suggest that the EMDR Peak Performance protocol is helpful in aiding higher functioning clients in overcoming performance anxiety and achieving more optimal performance. There is also evidence that focusing on maximizing the client's peak performance may be sufficient to remedy the distress and difficulty in preparing to deploy behavior in a successful way. While findings are promising, more research is needed, both case studies and controlled studies comparing the EMDR Peak Performance protocol with standard cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) methods for addressing performance anxiety that focus primarily on dysfunctional cognitions rather than the totality of dysfunctionally stored information (as in the EMDR), including cognitions as well as negative images and emotions and distressing physiological states.

Research comparing the standard EMDR protocol with the Peak Performance protocol could make a contribution in evaluating the approach needed for maximum effectiveness. It is possible that certain types of clients or certain manifestations of performance anxiety may be more responsive to one approach compared to the other.

The EMDR Peak Performance protocol, with or without the additional positive psychology techniques, could also be compared to standard CBT, which often uses in vivo exposure to anxiety provoking situations. These additional investigations would be informative and relevant to researchers, theorists, and clinicians.

In conclusion, there appears to be benefit in using an adaptation of the standard EMDR protocol to focus on present-day concerns, worries and anxieties associated with functioning at an optimal level, particularly in demanding environments. This special protocol is fundamentally the same as the basic EMDR approach. Yet the preliminary findings indicate that its relentless focus on the present rather than the past, its orientation toward what is possible, and its focus on teaching optimal skills allow EMDR reprocessing to be deployed more quickly for the benefit of higher functioning clients as they endeavor to reach important goals. Moreover, this special protocol appears to have greater face validity with higher functioning clients, particularly those interested in enhancing their work performance.

Whether or not it is advantageous to augment this special EMDR protocol through the use of empirically valid techniques drawn from the positive psychology research literature remains to be demonstrated. Nevertheless, the EMDR Peak Performance protocol is very much in line with the emphasis on what is right and enhancing well-being, central to the positive psychology movement.

Disclosure of interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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