

“I just need help overcoming _____!” Why are you asking me about my past?”

Understanding Prayer Ministry and EMDR Therapy – Dan Hitz

Dan Hitz is the Executive Director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan, Inc. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor, a Clinically Certified Trauma Professional, EMDR trained, and an ordained minister. This article explains why it is necessary to explore one’s past while overcoming current addictions and emotional distress. The article will also explore the difference between two effective forms of care – prayer ministry and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing [EMDR].



If you’ve ever tried to overcome addictive sin, or even a plain ol’ bad habit, you know how difficult it can be. You might even know the twelve steps by heart. Maybe you tell other people how to overcome life challenges. You know how it’s supposed to be, but somehow you just can’t get it to work for you. Much of typical recovery boils down to a “fake it till you make it” approach. The problem is that our own will power only seems to work for a little while before the bottom drops out. We’ve even prayed and asked God to “take these desires away”. We’ve felt His presence during those prayers, but the desires remain. What gives?

Over the years at Reconciliation Ministries, we’ve seen the Lord heal many men and women from the trauma of abuse and neglect. Most of them didn’t come to us because of their wounds from abuse and neglect. They came to us seeking help in overcoming current sexual sins and struggles with their relationships. One of the things we talk about early in their time with us is their childhood history. It’s not unusual to have them ask, “These things happened to me over twenty years ago and I’m trying to overcome my pornography addiction right now. Why do we have to talk about something that happened a long time ago?” That’s a legitimate question. The truth is that what happened to us while we were growing up gets put into this big file cabinet in our hearts and influences the choices we make today. Our current sin and dysfunctional behavior is very often a broken reaction to a problem that started a long time ago.



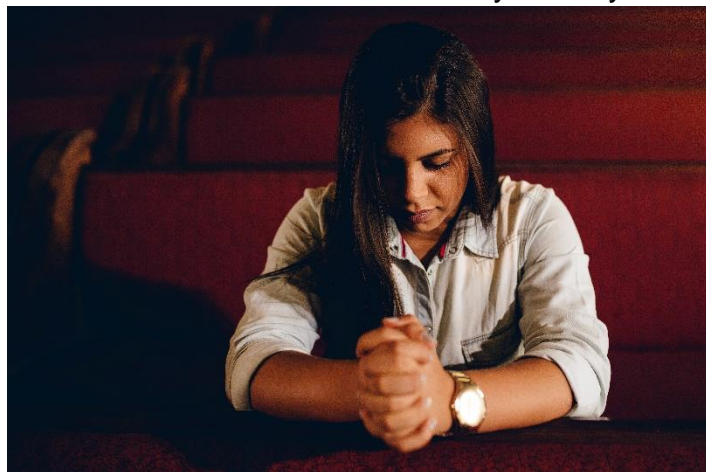
If we grew up in a “healthy enough” family, the file cabinet in our hearts is in pretty good shape. Major events happened, our parents nurtured us and taught us how to cope with stress, and those experiences get put into a bunch of hanging file holders in our hearts. Each different hanging file holder has a bunch of individual files in it that confirm our healthy perceptions, and give us information of how to proceed in similar situations as they arise later in our lives. Our healthy enough family has taught us pretty good coping skills, and given us the confidence we need to take appropriate initiative in the challenges life brings our way. However, if we’ve grown up in a dysfunctional family and have experienced abuse, our file system isn’t so efficient. The files

aren’t in alphabetical order. Some might actually be missing. Sometimes there’s so much bad information in our cabinet that it can’t even hold the good information that comes our way. The bad experiences keep falling out when we least expect it, making a mess of everything. When life happens, we don’t have many healthy resources to draw from to tell us how to navigate a current challenge.



Life can get tough. That's why we need to talk about our childhoods in the context of overcoming our current sin and emotional brokenness. The things we're wrestling with today are very often sinful, illegitimate ways of dealing with the pain that happened a long time ago. We're addicted to porn because we fear the pain of rejection and loneliness. We drink because we don't know what else to do with the hurt. We're drawn to sinful sexual activity because we've learned some pretty broken messages along the way. Messages like, "Sex is all I'm good for," or "I deserve to be abused." We keep reaching into the broken file cabinets in our hearts and pulling out bad information. We hate it, but it feels familiar. The thought of Biblical sexuality just seems too far outside our grasp. Sometimes the thought of being healthy scares us.

So how do we overcome the painful influences of our past? There are a variety of ways. The first step is to connect our hearts to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to lead the way. That thought alone can be terrifying to some of us who grew up in the church. Some have been deeply wounded by people who professed to be Christians, yet did things to us that were about as far from Christianity as they could be. Others grew up with no concept of God whatsoever. We assumed that God is just like our parents. Those who should have been the safest people in our lives may have caused us the most harm. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to trust God. He is gracious. He responds to even the weakest yes. As we say yes to God to the best of our ability, He begins to work in the depths of our soul. He begins to transform our hearts.



The next step is to be honest about our needs, and find a safe Christian who can walk with us in our healing process. We can start by reaching out to the pastoral care department of our local church. You can also call a licensed Christian counselor. Safe people can help you sort through the file cabinet in your heart and start making changes. Recovery programs, pastoral care, and Biblical licensed professional counseling can be an essential part of your healing. It can help you understand the Lord's will for your life, provide valuable instructions for recovery, and offer support.

During the early stages of your recovery, you'll look at things like accountability, boundaries, and ways to avoid sin. As your recovery progresses, you'll need to start looking at the root issues of your addiction. The main need you have is not to stop doing whatever it is you're trying to stop doing. The main need you have is to seek healing to resolve the deeper emotional issues that are causing you to do the things that you are trying to stop doing. Those are the root issues of your brokenness – the messed up files in your heart. The broken things you keep doing are the fruit issues. They're what happens when you access those messed up files as you navigate through life.

Reconciliation Ministries offers two highly effective techniques to address the root issues of your recovery. We've been offering prayer ministry for years. We start with the current events and triggers – the things that bother you and cause you to react negatively – and follow them back to significant times in your young life that you had similar experiences. As we're growing up, we often misinterpret the bad things that happen to us. Even though our adult brains can logically recognize that other people treated us inappropriately, we can still believe in our hearts that we're defective, unworthy, hopeless... you name it. Our broken reactions in our early life created the belief systems that are driving the problems we're dealing with now. Jesus meets us in our brokenness and replaces the lies we believe about ourselves with the truth. Sinful patterns are broken, and replaced with healthier ways of navigating through life.

Reconciliation Ministries recently began offering EMDR therapy. Sometimes we feel like the trauma that happened twenty years ago is still happening today. We respond according to how we feel and keep the brokenness going. If we suffered abuse as a young child, we may still feel unsafe as an adult. We might be in a constant state of “red alert” and overreact at the slightest hint of injustice. We might even misinterpret someone’s good intentions and drive them away out of fear that we might get hurt again. EMDR helps reprocess the negative experiences of our lives that taught us our broken responses, and helps us respond in a healthier way.



Prayer ministry and EMDR are similar in many ways. Both operate out of the recognition that we “feel what we believe” in our hearts, and act out of those beliefs in our daily lives. We might know in our head that Jesus loves us and that we have value, but if we feel unlovable and worthless we’ll end up acting out of our insecurity. We’ll do things that bring conflict and cause more feelings of unworthiness. Prayer Ministry and EMDR work to help the truths that we believe in our heads become the truth that we believe and act upon in our hearts. Both techniques help us understand the truth about our earlier life

experiences, and replace our broken beliefs with healthy beliefs that set us free. The files in our hearts become organized. The roots of our brokenness get resolved, and we begin to produce healthier, Biblical fruit. Prayer ministry and EMDR both work on the way that the Lord created our brains to process our current events in the context of our past experiences, and resolve our inner conflicts as we learn new information at a heart level. Both techniques reinforce godly principles.

The differences between prayer ministry and EMDR are what helps them be versatile recovery tools. For prayer ministry to work, the participant needs to allow themselves to feel the emotions of the present trigger, and allow the Holy Spirit to help him link those feelings back to a significant time earlier in his life when he felt similar emotions. Once he follows the emotional trail back to a key event that is the source of his negative emotions, we look for a core belief about self that is driving the emotions and the present pain or dysfunction. It will always be a simple belief about self. “I am worthless.” “I should have stopped the abuse.” “I am alone.” If we asked the person what his head is telling him, he would usually always have the correct response. “I have value in Christ.” “I was a small child and could not stop the abuse.” “Jesus is always with me.” The problem is that our hearts don’t always believe what our heads know to be true. It is during this portion of the prayer ministry that we ask the Lord to speak to the participant’s heart concerning the core belief. As he hears the truth from the Lord, the participant’s heart knowledge starts to believe what he already knew to be true in his head. Since we feel and act upon what we believe in our hearts, the person now believes the truth that he does have value and he begins to live according to that belief. The negative emotions in the core belief are now replaced with positive emotions that reflect the truth. The belief in the current memory that triggered the past pain is also replaced with the truth, and the participant is able to experience present interactions with a healthier perspective.

EMDR also follows the emotional trail from a present trigger to a significant event in the participant’s life when she formed a belief about herself and the world. While prayer ministry focuses on emotions and trusts that the Lord will help the person to follow the emotional trail back to the original memory, EMDR uses a process that relies upon the way the Lord designed our brains to automatically link our life experiences and resolve our inner conflicts once the proper memory connections are made. Although the participant still needs to understand the emotions experienced in an event, she does not have to connect as fully to the emotions as she would in prayer ministry. This process can be helpful

for those who have difficulty allowing themselves to focus on, and re-experience the emotions of a traumatic event. The process of EMDR works on a principle similar to REM sleep, or rapid eye movement sleep. When we dream, our minds are reprocessing the stressful events of the day as our eyes move from side to side. This helps to defuse the stress of the day, and we often wake up with a fresh perspective and feeling better. That's one of the reasons we might say, "Let's sleep on it and we'll make a decision in the morning".

When we experience a life event, the "news report" of the situation is processed in the left side of our brain. The left side of our brain is logical and analytical. The emotional response to the event is processed in the right side of our brains, which is more emotional and creative. Under normal circumstances, both sides of our brains communicate together and successfully process our experiences. Stress is resolved, lessons are learned, and initiative is formed. When we experience trauma such as sexual abuse, the left and right sides of our brains don't process the information properly. The emotional response to the abuse gets stored far away from the news report of the abuse and our brains can't resolve the conflict. We may get stuck in a fight, flight, or freeze response and feel like we're stuck in the trauma. By processing the event while using side to side eye movements similar to REM sleep, we begin to help our brains process the traumatic event and our inner conflicts get resolved. Instead of eye movements, we can also use sounds that alternate from side to side or little hand held devices that vibrate back and forth. EMDR helps our brains process the traumatic experiences properly, and brings resolution to the traumatic events. Our past conflict is resolved and we now have a sense of peace and calm.

While it may be painful to revisit our old wounds in the beginning, the benefit is lasting freedom in the long run. The pain and trauma that has held us captive for years gets replaced with peace and calm. The pain of the past no longer fuels the addictions and negative behavior that messes up our daily lives. We'll get more of our hearts back. We'll be better able to recognize the value of God's unique design for us personally, and fulfill His call on our lives.



If you've experienced sexual abuse, trauma, or neglect; prayer ministry and EMDR may help you. They can also help resolve depression, anxiety, and addictive behaviors. The therapists at Reconciliation Ministries will begin by taking a detailed history of your life. This will help us understand your needs, and the events in your life that we may need to visit during your treatment. We'll help you understand how your past is affecting you in the present, and teach you ways to cope with stress and anxiety outside the sessions. We'll help you decide which is best for you, traditional talk therapy, prayer ministry, EMDR, or a combination of methods. Then we'll walk with you as you process your past emotional wounds and learn healthy ways to interact with the world around you. Of course, all of this will be done in a safe, confidential, Christian environment as we focus on Jesus Christ.

If you or someone you care about is wrestling with sexual sin, relationship difficulties, anxiety, depression, or the aftermath of abuse; call Reconciliation Ministries at 586.739.5114. Let us walk with you to Jesus. He can heal your heart and transform your life.