

Helinä Häkkänen Abstract

EMDR therapy with clients in legal processes: Safety, stability, and empowerment

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Legal proceedings can be profoundly stressful life events that may elicit or exacerbate trauma-related symptoms in plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses. Elevated stress, anxiety, and post-traumatic reactions may influence individuals' behaviour and narrative coherence during investigations and court hearings, thereby affecting how their credibility and reliability are evaluated by legal authorities.

This presentation examines the clinical use of EMDR therapy within ongoing legal processes, emphasizing client safety, stability, and empowerment. Drawing on both clinical practice and empirical findings, several stages of EMDR intervention are outlined—from preparatory work prior to police hearings to the targeted processing of emotional reactions associated with court judgments. This method has been developed in collaboration with legal authorities, including the International Criminal Court, to promote trauma-informed justice practices.

Findings from a pilot study on EMDR-based witness preparation and a survey of police officers' attitudes toward EMDR in investigative contexts will be presented. The presentation also addresses questions of memory reliability and the retrieval of previously inaccessible memories (e.g., after amnesia in cases of child sexual abuse) before and after EMDR therapy.

Ethical, procedural, and methodological considerations related to the application of EMDR in legal contexts are discussed, with attention to timing, safety, and professional boundaries. Trauma-informed approaches are proposed as vital for supporting clients' psychological well-being and enhancing the fairness and accuracy of judicial proceedings.

Keywords: EMDR therapy, legal psychology, witness preparation, trauma-informed justice, memory reliability, forensic psychotherapy