



COVID-19, MENTAL CONDITIONS & EMDR

Improving the quality of sleep for children & adolescents

Michal EPSTEIN (Switzerland) Psychologist & psychotherapist
EMDR Europe Practitioner & child & adolescent Practitioner

In the daily routine of a family life, bedtime can become a real challenge. This crucial moment can become difficult for some families where the children/teenagers experience it as a separation or it will be the trigger for the child's reflections, fears and anxieties. Furthermore, bedtime is often a time for integrating the day and regulating the experiences of anxieties during that day, which tends to eternalize this bed-time routine.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

New hygiene and safety measurements: new restrictions change the daily life of children and adolescents tend often to increase stress and anxiety as they are implemented. Washing hands very often, using antibacterial gel, social distancing even from loved ones, queuing outside stores, observing parents' reaction to restrictions – all these can be a source of anxiety for children /adolescents. In addition, some parents may develop obsessive and compulsive behaviors beyond what is recommended, which will be observed by the children/ adolescent.

Radical changes in the child/ adolescent's life rhythm: here is another major impact on children/teenagers. Some have or had to do homeschooling and interrupt their extra-curricular activities. Within the same siblings, some children have been the only ones who have stopped going to school or, on the contrary, have gone to school, creating a family imbalance. Depending on the extracurricular activity that the children/adolescents is participating in, they may have continued it as usual (e.g., music), or in another way (e.g., online), or stopped it (e.g., sports). This change in the rhythm of school and extracurricular life has erased overnight a very important valve for this young population, useful for the regulation of affects and physical, psychological and social development, and has thus contributed to increase their worries and anxieties.

Changes in the parents' life rhythm: depending on their job, the parents have started to work from home or have had to continue to work from home, creating a variety of different, but often negative, reactions. Once again, a negative spiral of worries, anxieties and uncertainties was born.

Changes in childcare style: some day-care centers have had to close, others have seen the number of children reduced and some children are cared by the family, often by grandparents who, due to fear of being contaminated, had to stop doing so. Thus, children and adolescents have lost an important relational resource.

Semi-confinement - Confinement: the resource of seeing people, such as extended family, grandparents and friends, has been greatly diminished, if not destroyed completely. Children and adolescents, some of whom are in families where relationships are strained or are unhealthy, have found themselves locked into this system with no "way out", causing worry and anxiety.

Reduced social and physical contacts: this point has created a major life change but also the loss of resources essential to regulate affect, maintain good mood or the need for social contacts necessary for the good development of children and adolescents. Many of the children no longer see their grandparents or had to see them from a physical distance. We know how important is the need for physical contact for the young population. All of this has contributed to increased levels of worry and anxiety, noticeable also at bedtime.

CONSIDERATIONS IN EMDR THERAPY

Children/adolescents are more sensitive than adults eventually: these issues describe the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on young people's essential aspects of their life (which affects also their parents and entire environment). Moreover, children / adolescents feel the fear of adults and the world around them and can have difficulties in verbalizing it. This disturbs inner calm which often results in difficulties in falling asleep and sleeping.

COVID in the history taking (phase 1): COVID-19 and its impact on family, professional and health as well as the issues listed above, should be investigated in the anamnesis.

Explain what COVID-19 is: verify the child/adolescent's knowledge of COVID; explain the virus by adapting the vocabulary to their developmental age. The book *The Story of the Oyster and the Butterfly* by Ana Gomez (available in several languages) can be useful.

Understand what has changed for the children/adolescent and may worry them: the therapist should focus on how the life of his/her young patient has changed in relation to this disease. What can be better? The answer to this question can be a resource. What is worse now? The possible answers to this question can be potential targets for the application of the EMDR protocol. Some people are afraid of COVID-19, of getting sick, of having to be hospitalized, of dying, of infecting others, of imagining that their loved ones will be sick and even die.

Define targets related to COVID-19: the answers to these questions will be potential targets that can be re-processed with the standard EMDR protocol adapted to the developmental age of the children/adolescents.

Resource development: strengthen individual and family resources with slow BLSs.

Sensitize parents: parents need to be sensitive to all of the points listed. They can do the safe place and/or butterfly exercise with their children/adolescents, and the therapist can reprocess targets related to their children / adolescent's bedtime anxieties and help parents to (re)establish a stable and predictable bedtime ritual and life routine.

Creating an imaginary planet: another regulating exercise is to create an imaginary planet, with the child having to think about it at bedtime. To create the planet, the child needs to choose and draw a shape. Then, he draws inside this shape all what he / she loves and like most: family members, friends, animals, toys, food and drinks, and so on. Finally, he can choose a name for this planet. Then slow BLSs are performed to enhance the feeling of well-being induced by the exercise. The children / adolescent can display this drawing next to their bed and make butterfly hugs at bedtime to help them while falling asleep and sleep.