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Brainspotting

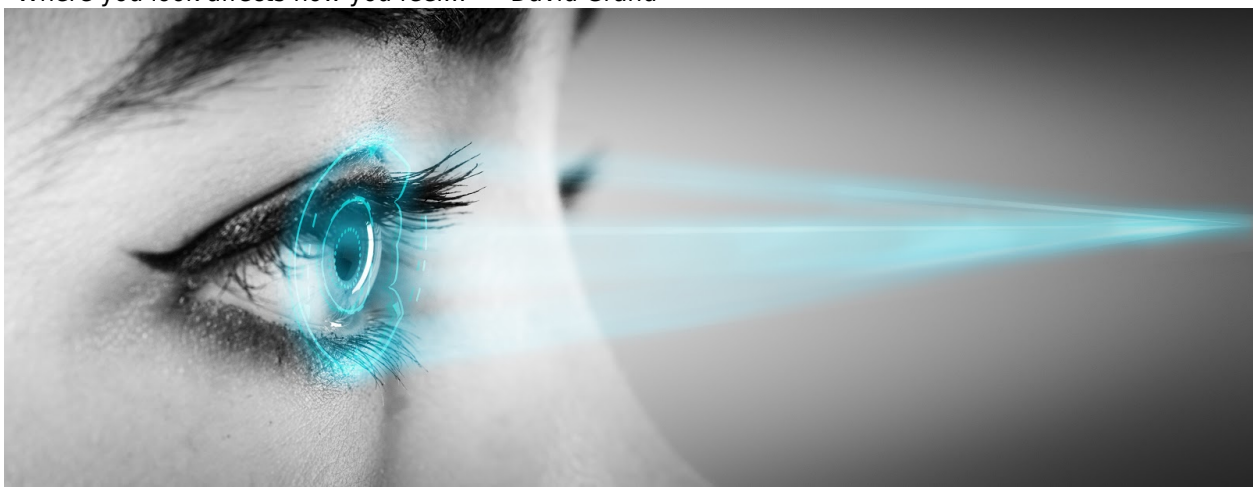
Summary: Brainspotting Therapy (BSP) is a relatively newer type of psychological treatment developed to help people with stress, anxiety and trauma. Many people with trauma or anxiety report trying their best to cope, or sometimes work with talk therapists or do cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to deal with their trauma, but still continue to feel bad and have symptoms. . Indeed, in many clients, standard talk therapies are of limited help perhaps because their logical brains are overwhelmed by the stress and trauma which is held in their emotional brains. In Brainspotting Therapy, a therapist guides the client with focused mindfulness and specific eye positions. This allows painful or distressing memories to be processed by the brain so that they are no longer distressing, allowing people to heal from past traumatic experiences. This method is also used to help people with anxiety, stress and worries, eating disorders, addictions, performance issues, and helping people work towards their goals and dreams.

J’s Story

J has had a tough life. Her parents fought constantly, and her father left when she was young. Growing up, she was bullied in school. She tried talking about her problems, but despite seeing many therapists, it never seemed to help. Now in her 30’s, she had another crisis with a breakup of a relationship, and saw another counsellor. Instead of talk therapy however, this counsellor is suggesting she try “brainspotting.”
J. isn’t sure if she should try it or not…

Quote

“Where you look affects how you feel…” -- David Grand



What is Brainspotting Therapy?

Brainspotting Therapy (BSP) is a brain-body based therapy involving eye positions that helps people overcome stress, trauma and obstacles in their life. It can be used together with other types of therapies and interventions, including medications.
When people experience “tolerable” or “healthy” amounts of stress and trauma, their brains and bodies are naturally able to process and deal with that stress and move on. For example, think about a significant loss such as losing a pet. It can feel devastating at first, but after talking about it, crying about it and getting support from others, one has “processed” the trauma and can move on.
However, when a person is exposed to significant trauma (e.g. life threatening event), or repeated stress (e.g. chronic bullying, abuse, neglect, life in a pandemic), then it can overwhelm the brain, leading to symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, sleep problems, trouble making decisions, obsessions, constant worries, and many more.

What Can Brainspotting Therapy Help with?

Brainspotting can help with a variety of situations, such as

- Post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Anxiety and phobias
- Addictions to substances, sugar, gamlbling, and other behaviours
- Depression
- Somatic pain, including chronic pain
- Performance enhancement for athletes, actors, artists, public speakers, and more
- Working towards your goals or ideal self

Who Developed It?

Brainspotting therapy was developed by Dr. David Grand, a practitioner of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), another type of trauma treatment which involves moving the eyes back and forth. He noticed that during EMDR, someclients would stop moving their eyes and stay focused on one spot. f He discovered therapeutic work using those eye positions could lead to rapid healing. He termed these eye positions, “brain spots”.

How Does Brainspotting Work?

During BSP, a therapist might guide the patient to:

- Think about an issue or problem that troubles , such as memories of bad experiences, fights, physical pain, or worries) The therapist will ask a few questions about the problem, but does not focus on an in-depth discussion of the trauma.
- The therapist helps the client find an eye position that feels
- Be aware of how their body is feeling, e.g. noticing any tension in the head, neck, shoulders, stomach or other areas;
- Listen to bilateral sounds, a type of music or nature sounds which move back and forth between right and left ears. Bilateral sound causes alternating activation of the right and left brain hemispheres and activates the parasympathetic, or calming, part of the nervous system.

Through these and other interventions, the therapist helps the patient’s brain to reprocess their anxiety, trauma and stress. When completed, clients report feeling calmer and more relaxed.
Note that although ideally it is done face-to-face, brainspotting can still be done virtually. This makes it very accessible, even during the pandemic.

Self-Help Strategies Using Brainspotting Principles

Gazespotting

A gaze spot is a term for the natural position that we might look to when calm, or under stress.

Do’s

- Do you notice that when you are stressed or anxious, that you look in a certain location?
    - If so, just observe and allow this to happen without interrupting it.
    - Be present in the moment, and allow your brain to process naturally.
- Do you notice that when your loved one is stressed or anxious, that they look at a certain position?
    - If so, allow it to happen, and you might comment: “I notice that when you’re stressed, you tend to look up to the left. Looking in certain directions can help anxiety, so it’s good that you do that.”
    - Don’t interrupt their gaze, such as by saying, “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” because it may very well be, that your child needs to look in a certain way to self-regulate (i.e. feel calmer).

Bilateral brain activities

Activities which alternate between the left and right sides of the brain are felt to be helpful when people are feeling stressed or upset. Examples of bilateral activities include:

- Alternating nostril breathing, a part of yoga;
- Listening to “bilateral” music or bilateral nature sounds;
- Juggling;
- Drumming;
- Going for a walk or a run.
- Dancing

J’s Story, Part 2

J decides to give brainspotting a try. She is relieved to discover that she does not have to go into depth talking about painful past life events. With the therapist, they agree to work on a past trauma. After only a few visits, she is feeling significantly better. She can think about the past trauma without getting upset and distressed. She feels hopeful again, that she is able to heal and overcome her past.

For More Information

Brainspotting Canada website
www.brainspottingcanada.com
Udemy.com has a course about brainspotting that the general public can take.
https://www.udemy.com/course/brainspotting-by-david-grand/

About this Document

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Disclosures and competing interests: All of the above clinicians work with people who struggle with anxiety, stress and trauma using brainspotting. Marjorie Robb, Jeanne Talbot, Jane Evans and Michel Poirier are members of Brainspotting Canada, an organization that seeks to promote brainspotting as a therapeutic technique.
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