



Womens Press Article

Perseverance for Veterans

by **Sheila Regan**

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Elaine Wynne works with veterans at her home office in Golden Valley.(photo by Sarah Whiting)

Elaine Wynne, the founder and president of the Veteran Resilience Project (VRP), almost gave up on the project in 2011. She had spent years trying to get funding to use Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other illnesses that affect those in military service. She was tired.

One day, when Wynne met with her group of EMDR therapists, she said, “I think I’m going to just stop this thing.” A group leader suggested she take six months off. In her fifth month of break, she saw a documentary with veterans who were being interviewed in jail. They all had PTSD. Wynne says she knew she had to go back to the work.

Wynne’s husband is a veteran. She has many family members who have served in the military, including brothers and her grandfather, who was a sergeant major in the Prussian army.

In 2005, when veterans began returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, Wynne knew that EMDR could be helpful. Talking about trauma in everyday conversations is not easy, and not talking about it can be even harder.

What Is EMDR?

EMDR is a body of psychology started by Francine Shapiro, who passed away in July 2019. As part of the eight-phase treatment, therapists ask patients to recall different aspects of their traumatic memories. Simultaneously, a therapist moves his or her hand back and forth in front of the patient’s face and the patient tracks its movement with their eyes.

As this happens, for reasons thought to be connected to the biological process humans undergo during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, patients are freer to reinterpret the meaning of a painful event on an emotional level. Unlike talk therapy, EMDR taps into a patient’s natural intellectual and emotional capacity to heal from a traumatic event, rather than asking him or her to recall memories aloud as in talk-based therapy.

“EMDR is specifically set up to reduce trauma,” Wynne says. “What you want to do is remove that distraction, remove that pain, that memory that wakes you up at night.”

The success of EMDR proves that the mind can heal from psychological trauma in ways similar to how the body recovers from physical trauma: When trauma-based blockages are removed, the mind naturally moves towards stability; when wounds are cleaned, the body

heals faster. As a result, patients report feeling empowered by memories that once stood in the way of their healing.

After ending her break in 2011, Wynne talked to EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs, which had received grant money to work with veterans. She was told to put a plan together in two weeks.

In 2013, Wynne's group began collecting data and analyzing it. They found that 74 percent of the veterans they worked with no longer suffered PTSD after EMDR treatment.

The nonprofit Veteran Resilience Project was formed soon after, to raise money to provide EMDR for veterans of all eras. Wynne found an ally in David Shulkin, the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health, who in 2016 got 100 Veterans Administration staff trained in EMDR. That number is currently up to 200 across the United States, Wynne says.

“He said, ‘why aren’t we doing it, and why are we stopping other people from doing it?’” Wynne recalls. “Within two months, there was at least one EMDR person at every VA Center in the country.”

Wynne is humble in noting her own achievements. “Sure, I helped some people myself as a therapist, and I fielded some calls, but that’s just what you do when you know how to do something,” she says. “I don’t mind if people acknowledge me or my group for what we did. It’s nice, but it’s not why I get up in the morning.”



Elaine Wynne recommends visiting the Veteran Resilience Project website (resiliencemn.org) to learn about the work, as well as ways to volunteer. You can learn more about the EMDR technique at emdria.org