

THE “BACK-UP TECHNIQUE” FOR EMDR

George Abbott, Ph.D.

The “BACK-UP Technique” applies to the most frequently occurring form of dissociation in EMDR reprocessing—a defensive maneuver that is not necessarily associated with a dissociative disorder. Many clients, regardless of their DSM diagnosis, can lose awareness of their disturbing material during reprocessing. For example, a client is processing a disturbing memory well, with typical progress being reported between sets of BLS. Suddenly, after a set, the client reports something like “It just went blank;” or “Just numbness now;” or, “It’s foggy.” This sort of response usually signals that dissociation has just occurred. An experienced therapist can usually tell from the previous discourse whether the resolution has been achieved versus when some form of dissociation has taken place. In either case, EMDR therapists have been taught to redirect the client “back to target,” to see what comes up. From that point they will usually resume processing.

But this misses an opportunity to look more closely at the dissociative operation that has *just now* occurred. The “Back-up Technique” is a highly efficient way for the therapist and the client to immediately learn more about what has just happened, why it has happened, and to straightaway resume processing without the potentially distracting step of “going back to target.”

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE “BACK-UP TECHNIQUE”

“Please back yourself up over the past few moments---to where you were just before it went blank (became fuzzy, foggy, etc.). And let me know when you are there.”

(Therapist use of the nonverbal motion of “fingers walking” can be a useful way to help a client understand the mental operation that is being requested)

When a client reports his/her experience, e.g., “I am really angry!”, the therapist says something like “*Do your best to just stay with that...follow it and just notice where it goes.*” The therapist then adds BLS.

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CLINICAL OBSERVATIONS WITH THE BACK-UP TECHNIQUE

- 1) Clients are almost universally able to comply with B/U directions.
- 2) May be useful up to 2 – 4 sessions per week in a full-time EMDR practice.
- 3) B/U usually reveals a new affect or a more intense version of a previous affect. Sadness may have shifted to anger; anger may have shifted to rage, etc. This usually leads to an understanding of what it was that a client did not believe s/he could tolerate in the processing even before it emerged into consciousness, and that this was the reason for the dissociation.
- 4) The therapist’s permissive encouragement to a client, “do your best to stay with it...” very often leads to continued processing and, most importantly, verification for a client that s/he actually *can* tolerate the content that originally lead to a dissociative defense.
- 5) The B/U technique can turn a moment of mindlessness into subtler awareness of mind, whereas “Go back to target” bypasses important mental events.
- 6) Some clients require repeated use of the B/U technique before they stop using dissociation during reprocessing.
- 7) It is sometimes useful to offer psycho-education re: dissociative defense toward the end of a session in which the “Back-up” was first used.
- 8) Some clients report “catching” themselves dissociating between sessions and “backing-up” themselves, with the good effect of increasing mindfulness and decreasing use of the dissociative defense