

## **Trauma Release For Enhanced Health And Happiness**

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We are constantly hearing of people who have been traumatized by such situations as childhood abuse, or being in war zones, and then suffering for years afterward with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and exhibiting such problems as depression, anxiety, nightmares, insomnia, impaired relationships and inability to hold down a job. We see "shell-shocked" veterans who leap up in panic at the sound of a car backfiring or even at the sound of a load of dishes being dropped in a restaurant, as I recently saw. We are now looking at new and effective solutions.

There is an emerging new category of therapies known as "energy psychology" (EP). While it's unfamiliar to most psychologists, counselors and helping professionals, let alone members of the general public, this is changing rapidly as recent clinical research continues to build the case for its effectiveness.

Energy psychology is both a clinical and a self-help modality that combines psychological and physical processes for bringing about therapeutic change. While it is based on established scientific principles that govern psychology, the approach also incorporates concepts and techniques from non-Western systems for healing and spiritual development. Its most frequently used methods combine the stimulation of acupuncture points (by tapping on them or holding them) while actively thinking about a specific psychological issue.

Sound strange? It may, but it can work! The field of EP is fast growing due to its ability to provide swift results with no abreaction (e.g., a severe emotional reaction) in most cases -- particularly with trauma patients. For instance, in the spring of 2006, 50 orphans of the Rwandan genocide, many of whom had witnessed their parents brutally murdered by machete 12 years earlier, were treated with a single session of [Thought Field Therapy](#) (TFT). Following this session, scores on a PTSD checklist completed by caretakers and on a self-rated PTSD checklist had significantly decreased. The number of participants exceeding the PTSD cutoffs decreased from 100 percent to 6 percent. [Retesting a year later showed that the improvements held.](#) There have been many other outcome studies describing the effectiveness of EP methods in quickly and permanently reducing maladaptive fear responses to traumatic memories and related cues.

Even so, the approach has been controversial. Some consider EP to fall into the category of pseudoscience. This is, in part, because the mechanisms by which EP works have not been fully established. That, too, is changing.

In his 2010 ["Rapid Treatment of PTSD"](#) article in *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, psychologist David Feinstein speculates that adding acupressure point stimulation to psychological exposure is unusually effective in its speed and power because signals are sent directly to the emotional core of the brain known as the amygdala, responsible for the processing and memory of emotional reactions, resulting in rapid reduction of maladaptive fear. The more we learn about brain function, electromagnetic energies, and neurochemistry, the more evidence there is to support this explanation.

Another possibility is that energy psychology techniques share certain characteristics with [EMDR](#), hypnosis and other therapies that use highly-focused patterns of treatment. First, the client is asked to pick a specific difficult memory, then rate how distressing it is with a SUDs (Subjective Units of Distress) number between 0-10. They follow this with a therapeutic operation such as tapping on meridian points (related to acupuncture points), bilateral stimulation (tapping alternate knees, or moving their eyes back and forth), or the use of imagery. The client is then asked to report on his/her experience as well as the current SUDs level. If the SUDs is zero, the therapy is essentially done for this target issue. If it is not zero, whatever remains becomes the new target of the intervention. The therapeutic operation is performed again, and a new SUDs assessment is taken. This continues until the SUDs is zero or close to zero.

A recent [randomized controlled trial](#) (soon to be published in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*) has shown EFT to significantly lower the stress hormone, cortisol, and self-reported psychological symptoms after a single treatment session. It's exciting to see more robust research validating years of anecdotal positive results with EP -- many of which, as in the case of the Rwandan orphan study or the rapid relief of PTSD symptoms experienced by U.S. combat veterans treated with EFT, have seemed unbelievable from a talk therapy perspective. While more sophisticated (and more expensive) studies need to be done, the data continues to stack up in favor of EP.

Despite my own psychoanalytic/psychodynamic training (i.e., talk therapy), once I introduced EMDR then EFT into my practice some years ago, I was able to help patients overcome their fears and traumas more easily, quickly and completely. I still use EP in my practice or refer patients to EP practitioners while I focus on the more physiological aspects (diet, nutritional supplements, hormonal balancing, etc). I find the combination to be extremely useful: The brain functions better when it is biochemically balanced (and this works both ways, of course).

It is possible that energy psychology is following the path described by William James a century ago: "A new idea is first condemned as ridiculous and then dismissed as trivial, until finally it becomes what everybody knows."

*For more information about energy psychology, check out The Association of Comprehensive Energy Psychology (ACEP) [website](#). This international non-profit organization of licensed mental health professionals and allied energy health practitioners, dedicated to developing and applying energy psychology methods, will be holding their annual conference in beautiful San Diego in May. Its counterpart -- The Canadian Association for Integrative and Energy Therapies ([CAIET](#)) -- will be holding its annual conference in Toronto in October, where I'll be a speaker.*