

Tapping method touted to treat PTSD

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TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — An Oro Valley counselor says a controversial method of tapping on certain areas of the body can relieve debilitating symptoms of a condition that affects thousands of soldiers returning from combat.

As more troops return from Iraq this year, many will be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that changes the way the body reacts to stress and can emotionally hobble sufferers with troubling flashbacks, anxiety and hopelessness.



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Counselor Mary E. Stafford is touting a method of treating PTSD called “emotional-freedom technique.” By learning to tap on specific “meridian points” of the body, Stafford says veterans can tap away negative emotions.

The technique is not endorsed by the American Psychological Association, which does not approve or endorse specific therapy techniques, spokeswoman Kim Mills said. And an association committee did not find sufficient evidence of the technique’s “treatment efficacy” to allow it to be taught to association members for continuing education credit.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs advocates standard treatments for PTSD, including “exposure-based” treatments, which involve having sufferers repeatedly re-experience the traumatic event. The VA does not advocate the emotional-freedom technique as a stand-alone treatment, said Pepe Mendoza, spokesman for the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System.

However, a nurse practitioner with the local VA is taking part in a project offering the emotional-freedom technique to veterans who have completed standard treatments to see whether it offers additional benefit, Mendoza said.

Critics say there’s no scientific proof the technique works, and some say the power of suggestion may be what’s effective on practitioners. But Stafford and other supporters say it’s based on 5,000 years of Chinese medicine and can erase PTSD symptoms.

Stafford, a Tucson native who holds a doctorate in biochemistry in addition to a counseling degree, will hold a free event Friday to introduce the method. She’s also looking for veterans to take part in an advanced study of the technique, free of charge.

Stafford charges regular clients to learn the technique - typically \$120 for a 90-minute session, but says she operates on a sliding scale. She says the technique can be learned in one or two sessions.

Veteran Bud Leazenby, 63, was just 19 when he enlisted in the Marine Corps and went to Vietnam.

He said his PTSD manifested with emotional numbness that he maintained first with drugs and alcohol, and then, after he was sober, by staying busy all the time. He made sure to fill each day with work and frequently moved between cities and jobs.

He now “taps” every day, using the technique that Stafford taught him.

“Staying busy works for a while and then you run out of energy. It doesn’t stay buried over time. It comes more and more to the surface,” Leazenby said. “You go through the tapping points in your body. It’s been work to accept that it works. Part of you wants to be in pain and misery. There is survivor’s guilt.”

At one tapping point the practitioner says to themselves that even though they have a specific problem, they deeply and completely accept themselves.

“I’ll say, ‘even though I am very sad at the loss of my buddy, I love and care for myself,’” Leazenby said. “It’s difficult in the beginning but it gets you through it. You own the anger, and then you cry.”

“It has definitely made a difference and complements other things that I do. I’ve never tapped on something with a pain level of anguish that’s say at an 8 and gone through the tapping and had it stay at 8. Maybe it only goes down to 7, but you can feel it.”

Martha Zimmerman Chambers uses the technique to get past PTSD she had after Operation Desert Storm when she was in the U.S. Army. Chambers, a 39-year-old massage therapist, said she is also using the technique right now to get through her family’s financial difficulties.

“I was on medication for depression that made me completely unable to work. I was a drooling idiot,” she said. “The military teaches you to suck it up and move on. They don’t teach you how to deal with what comes later. Veterans now, we are learning how to change that. You can do this at home. When I tap I believe my nerves are being activated to calm my organs. My stomach doesn’t feel like there’s this cannonball in there. When everything begins to relax, the body can heal.”

Chambers said not every technique works for every person. “I don’t believe any one technique is the answer, but opening up the mind and finding a different way is a great thing,” she said.

Indeed, local naturopathic physician Teri Davis trained in the emotional-freedom technique and says it can be very effective. But in her work with veterans, Davis prefers something called mindfulness-based stress reduction, where the past is never discussed. The object of mindfulness is learning to live in the moment, regardless of the past or future.

Davis works with the local nonprofit Purple Mountain Institute, which offers free programs for veterans.

“I hesitate when I hear the word cure. You can’t not have had the experiences you went through,” Davis said. “With mindfulness one of the things people can learn is to step back a little bit and make enough room so that memory isn’t all that exists for them.”

The technique Davis uses was developed at the University of Massachusetts and many of her referrals come from the local VA.

Mills, of the American Psychological Association, says that if a mental-health provider suggests energy psychology to a client, the client would be well-advised to ask for research evidence that it is safe and effective. Such evidence would include research published in reputable, peer-reviewed scholarly journals as well as the clinician’s own expertise in a therapy technique, she said.

The technique Stafford uses is based on one developed by American psychologist Roger Callahan in the 1980s and adapted in the 1990s by Gary Craig, a neuro-linguistic programming practitioner.

“We have energy coming out of our fingertips,” Stafford said. “We are designed as human beings to be self-healing.”

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