

New help for troubled vets

SR group promotes alternative tapping therapy based on acupressure

By [JEREMY HAY](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Saturday, March 13, 2010 at 4:02 a.m.

To treat the post-traumatic stress disorder he's endured for four decades — the sleeplessness, the depression, the troubled relationships — Peter Tracy turned last year to tapping.

"It made a difference," said Tracy, 61, a Vietnam veteran. "I feel like I'm doing OK."

He said his Army service in Vietnam with a combat supply unit felt "like a nightmare I couldn't get out of."

Tapping, known formally as emotional freedom techniques, or EFT, is a therapy in which patients, guided by someone trained in the procedure, tap on acupressure points by the eye, over the lip, on the chest and under an arm. At the same time, the patient describes past traumas, ranks the intensity of the memory and repeats statements meant to affirm self-acceptance in the face of the experience.

Once trained, they can use the technique on themselves as needed.

"It sounded pretty far-fetched to me," said Tracy, a social worker with Sonoma County's Mental Health Services Division. He tried tapping as part of a pilot study being run by the Stress Project, a Santa Rosa-based research group.

The Stress Project now is trying to convince the Department of Veterans Affairs to adopt EFT therapy as a standard treatment for veterans with PTSD.

"It shows massive drops in PTSD, pain, depression, all kinds of things," said Dawson Church, an author on alternative medicines and the Stress Project's executive director.

Two peer-reviewed published studies — in the International Journal of Healing and Caring and in Traumatology — found positive results in veterans who took part in six sessions.

According to a clinical study conducted at the Marshall University Medical School in Huntington, W.Va., and published in the International Journal of Healing and Caring, veterans' anxiety was reduced by 46 percent, depression by 49 percent and PTSD levels by 50 percent.

VA therapists and military psychologists who have used EFT said it is highly effective.

"It's a very useful and powerful technique ... and there are things that you can do with it that you can't do with other techniques," said Jerry Wesch, a clinical psychologist at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas.

Private therapists began using EFT with veterans over the past 15 years, Church said. But so far, the VA hasn't embraced the technique.

It's not used at the VA's National Center for PTSD in Menlo Park, and no doctors knew enough about it to comment, a VA spokeswoman said. It's not used in either the Santa Rosa or San Francisco clinics.

The VA "is pretty careful about not wanting to use treatments too soon before they've been thoroughly tested," said Patrick Reilly, director of mental health services at the Santa Rosa veterans clinic.

Reilly said pilot studies done to date may have been too small to produce enough data for the VA to consider.

The Stress Project is now winding up a larger study in which about 60 veterans nationwide have undergone six therapy sessions and six months of followup study. Adherents hope the results will help persuade the VA to take a more thorough look at EFT, Church said.

North Bay veterans such as Tracy, who have been part of the latest pilot study, say EFT has helped ease significant and long-running PTSD symptoms.

Bill Simon, 59, of Santa Rosa served in Vietnam as an aircraft crew chief. He said regular and random rocket



Christopher Chung/PD

Bill Simon, 60, has been able to alleviate symptoms associated with post traumatic stress disorder by using emotional freedom techniques. Simon served in Vietnam as an aircraft crew chief.

An advertisement for Zicam Cold Remedy. The background is orange. At the top, white text reads "MAKES COLDS CRASH. SO YOU CAN REBOOT FASTER." Below that, in smaller white text, it says "Shorten your cold with Zicam." On the right, there is a white box with "ZICAM" in blue and "Cold Remedy" in red. On the left, a yellow box says "SAVE \$2.00 NOW" with a right-pointing arrow.

attacks wore down his psyche, leading to years of "low grade" symptoms that began to heighten with the onset of the Iraq war.

In 2009, he retired from the county's Mental Health Services Division as program planning and evaluation analyst. He was unhappy with VA-prescribed medications and plagued by nightmares he couldn't recall, as well as by inability to sleep, anger and depression.

Late last year, he tried EFT.

Before it, he said, "On a scale of one to 10, I was about an eight. I was stressed out. I was f--d up. It was all I could do to maintain at work."

Now, said Simon, "I'm a four. I don't wake up anymore with that boom, boom, boom, heart-pounding thing."

In Massachusetts, clinical social worker Marilyn Garland is preparing a workshop to introduce EFT to VA staffers hailing from around the country.

"I have the same experience as every person who uses it; it's a very effective tool in treating trauma," said Garland, who works at the Worcester VA Outpatient Clinic, part of the Boston VA Health System.

Church said he's frustrated that the VA has yet to adopt — or to formally study — EFT as standard treatment for a problem that the department itself has said is growing dramatically as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars continue into their seventh and 9th years, respectively.

"All of the efforts to get the VA to study this have been futile," he said. "The people at the VA are generally wonderful and a great resource for veterans, but as with many big bureaucracies, getting anything new in takes a lot of time and energy."

A 2009 Stanford University study concluded that the PTSD rate among Iraq War veterans will be about 35 percent. As of 2007, 1.5 million service members had served in Iraq or Afghanistan, according to the Office of the Surgeon General.

"The urgency now is that we have these overwhelming numbers of troops coming back from the Middle East," Church said.

At the Santa Rosa VA, Reilly said the department probably wants more data before investigating EFT further.

"I don't think the VA would write off anything," he said. "They're pretty empirically based and they're pretty receptive to anything that works, I think it's just too early."

You can reach Staff Writer Jeremy Hay at 521-5212 or jeremy.hay@pressdemocrat.com.

Copyright © 2010 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.