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From The Times

August 13, 2005

Tap away the trauma

Move over Freud — energy therapies may be just as effective

by Catriona Wrottesley

Rebecca Lamy looked out of her window on to a garden covered with gravel. No grass. Not one flower. Strangely, this barren outlook calmed her. Nothing to attract wasps. Even the thought of the black and yellow insects made her heart thud. "I'd never been stung, but was terrified that I might be. I had visions of suffering some terrible allergic reaction," explains Lamy, 27, a training manager for Marks & Spencer, from Jersey. A friend recommended emotional freedom technique (EFT) which, like acupuncture, is based on the idea that energy flows around the body along 14 meridian lines. Sometimes, according to the theory, these pathways get blocked by negative emotion, causing anxiety, phobias, even physical illness.

The technique involves gently tapping with fingertips on acupressure points along this meridian system while focusing on the negative emotion. Tapping releases blockages so the body's energy can flow freely.

Sceptical but willing to try, Lamy consulted Val Lynch, an EFT therapist, who runs the Heart Centre, in Eastbourne, East Sussex, with her husband Paul. "First, we talked to find out where my fear came from," Lamy says. "I found that it wasn't wasps that terrified me; it was their control. They could decide whether or not to sting me. I discovered that I had issues about control from childhood."

Her first session lasted three hours. "Afterwards, I felt lighter, as if my life had been shaken about and I could start again. I went for a walk among trees and flowers. I almost had to be reminded that I used to be afraid of wasps. It changed my life."

Nicola Quinn, 49, a holistic therapist from Kent, who recently published an e-book on curing panic attacks with EFT (www.nicolaquinn.com/cb), knows from personal experience how effective the technique can be. For 15 years she suffered panic attacks so debilitating that she was housebound. "I was cured in an afternoon," she says.

EFT began in the US about 20 years ago and is less known in the UK. However, interest is growing and far from being confined to the alternative fringes, the technique is being used in the NHS by highly respected clinicians such as Dr Phil Mollon, a clinical psychologist at the mental health unit of the Lister Hospital, Stevenage. He is also a psychotherapist, who trained at the Tavistock Clinic, north-west London, and an accredited practitioner of EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing, see panel facing page) and an advanced practitioner of meridian energy therapies, of which EFT is one.

Dr Mollon's expertise crosses the divide between talk-based therapies and new bodily-based energy therapies. He argues that Freud's theories, with their interest in the flow and blockages of a form of energy around the body (the libido) are a form of energy psychology.

Accustomed to long-term psychoanalytic work, Dr Mollon acknowledges that some mental pain doesn't get better with psychotherapy, no matter how much insight the patient gains. "Psychoanalysis is useful in generating insight, but is not good at relieving mental pain which stems from trauma. Trauma often remains locked in the emotional part of the brain, which words can't reach."

Nine months ago, David Gentry, 35, a builder, had a serious accident. A car ran into his stationary car, while he was in it, at 50mph and he suffered a fractured spine and damaged neck discs which caused constant pain. He also suffered flashbacks. Three weeks ago, he was referred to Mollon who offered him TFT (thought field therapy, see panel facing page), a more complex energy therapy which gave rise to EFT.

Gentry says: "After a few minutes tapping, while thinking of the accident, my anxiety — on a scale of 0-10 — went from 9 to 5. After a bit more tapping, it was 2. It was unbelievable." A week later he had another session for physical pain. "It was amazing. I've halved my intake of painkillers."

Three years ago Therese McGoldrick, a behavioural psychotherapist who works for NHS Forth Valley, in Larbert, Scotland, began using EFT with patients. Her team of seven have all undergone training and are convinced of its benefits. "It's very effective where there's been traumatic experience. It also works well for grief, phobias, some pain conditions and morbid jealousy. A colleague has observed that it has been helpful, too, with people who self-harm by cutting themselves." Because EFT works in a few sessions — sometimes only one — it's very cost-effective and McGoldrick says that patients can be shown how to practise it at home. McGoldrick,

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who is hoping to attract research funding for the technique, pioneered EMDR, in Scotland ten years ago. It is now accepted internationally as a mainstream procedure.

Mollon's radical conclusion that psychoanalysis doesn't work for certain types of mental pain has implications for the future of talk-based therapies. So, how much resistance is he likely to encounter from colleagues? Brett Kahr, a senior clinical research fellow in psychotherapy and mental health at the Centre for Child Mental Health, North London, says: "Dr Mollon has been such a substantial contributor to our understanding of psychology for so many years that his endorsement of energy therapies means that the rest of us in the psychoanalytical field would do well to pay his investigations serious attention."

How do they work?

Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) is based on the discovery in 1987 by the US clinical psychologist Francine Shapiro that side-to-side eye movements relieve mental pain caused by trauma. During sessions, the patient is asked to think of a distressing image while following side-to-side movements of the therapist's finger or a moving light. The theory is that because trauma remains locked in the right (emotional) hemisphere of the brain, it cannot be processed by language and logic which are left-brain functions. EMDR establishes connections between left and right brain so that traumatic experience can be thought and talked about as a past event, rather than continually relived in the present.

Thought field therapy (TFT) is an energy therapy developed by the US clinical psychologist Roger Callahan in 1979. He discovered that getting a patient to think about an emotional problem while gently tapping on a specific point along the body's energy pathways, or meridian lines, was startlingly effective in curing phobias and anxiety states.

Emotional freedom technique (EFT) is a later development of TFT, devised by Gary Craig, a US engineer, who was one of Callahan's students. Craig created a universal tapping sequence along seven acupressure points. EFT is gentler than EMDR because it tackles symptoms, without re-exposure to the trauma.

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