



Emotional Freedom Techniques (Tapping)

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Overview

As of January 2022, over 275 research studies have been published on energy psychology methods in peer-reviewed journals (EP is an umbrella term and covers Emotional Freedom Techniques [EFT] Tapping). These modalities have been researched by more than 200 investigators in over 12 countries. Approaches such as EFT have also been referred to as Combined Somatic and Cognitive Techniques.

This includes:

- 70 randomized controlled trials
- 55 clinical outcome studies

All except one of the above 125 studies document EP's effectiveness.

- 5 meta-analyses
- 5 systematic reviews of EP modalities
- 12 comparative reviews (EP and other therapies)

All reviews document EP effectiveness.

- 65 randomized controlled trials have also documented efficacy for these methods.

While the terms 'meridian' and 'energy' were once used to describe how EFT works, there is an abundance of information available now as to how it actually does – and it is beyond energy. EFT Tapping protocols have resulted in clinically desirable changes in biologic markers such as hormone production, cardiovascular function, immune response, gene expression, brain wave patterns, and blood flow in targeted brain regions, and provide an evidential base for the approach.

Dismantling studies show that the actual stimulation of acupoints is what makes EFT work – not necessarily the therapeutic relationship, nor the statements you say (as long as you tap when the emotion is present of course). Tapping on sham acupoints does not result in significant change.

Read this paper for further detail - Church, D., Stapleton, P., Yang, A., & Gallo, F. (2018). Is Tapping on Acupuncture Points an Active Ingredient in Emotional Freedom Techniques? A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Comparative Studies. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 206(10), 783-793. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000878>

Understanding How Tapping Works

EFT Tapping uses known acupoints in acupuncture. A 10-year-research program conducted at Harvard Medical School used fMRI and other imaging equipment to study the effects of stimulating selected acupuncture points in various brain areas. The investigators found that certain acupoints can send signals to the amygdala that reduce threat activation almost instantly. Without talking, this somatic intervention can quickly turn off hyperarousal, a state of high alert, in the limbic system. Because hyperarousal is the neurologic substrate of many of the challenges faced by psychotherapy clients—such as sleeping problems, difficulties concentrating, irritability, anger, panic, anxiety, self-destructive behaviour, guilt, and shame—the implication of this finding for clinicians is substantial. It suggests the possibility of rapid intervention for deactivating hyperarousal in situations, real or imagined.

The Primo Vascular System

To date, scientific theories have not been able to explain the functional paths used by traditional Eastern medicine. According to Western medicine, no known anatomical foundation exists for the meridians and unknown nervous, circulatory, endocrine, and immune mechanisms mediate the effects of acupuncture. In the early 1960s, only one hypothesis was proposed to explain the anatomical basis of the meridians. By using different experimental approaches during the past 10 years, the number of scientific papers that report the discovery of different anatomical and physiological evidence confirming the existence of **an anatomical basis for the meridian system has increased**.

A new biomedical theory that explains the possible existence is calling this **the primo vascular system** (PVS). The PVS is a previously unknown system that integrates the features of the cardiovascular, nervous, immune, and hormonal systems. It also provides a physical substrate for the acupuncture points and meridians.

In short, the primo vascular system is a possible PHYSICAL meridian system (not energetic). This would explain why tapping on it (or using traditional acupuncture) actually has biochemical changes, and also why you need to tap the exact acupoint.

Read more - <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ecam/2015/303769/>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2005290113002082>

In 2021, Chinese researchers showed that injected dye at strategic skin points generated linear migrations closely aligning with acupuncture meridians – but not in controls (did not generate any notable linear pathway). This is further evidence the system is physical and not just energetic.

The Effectiveness of Tapping

Meta-analyses show EFT to have a large treatment effect for anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. For anxiety, $d = 1.23$ (Clond, 2016), for depression $d = 1.31$ (Nelms & Castel, 2016) and for PTSD, $d = 2.96$ (Sebastian & Nelms, 2016).

See the papers here:

- Clond, M., (2016). Emotional Freedom Techniques for Anxiety: A Systematic Review With Meta-analysis. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 204(5), 388-395. doi:10.1097/NMD.0000000000000483.
- Nelms, J. & Castel, D. (2016). A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized and non-randomized trials of Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) for the treatment of depression. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 13(6), 416-426. doi:10.1016/j.explore.2016.08.001
- Sebastian, B., & Nelms, J. (2016). The effectiveness of Emotional Freedom Techniques in the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder: A meta-analysis. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 13(1), 16-25. doi:10.1016/j.explore.2016.10.001

EFT has also met the American Psychological Association (APA) standards as an "efficacious" treatment for phobias, anxiety, depression, and PTSD in previous years (see Church, D. (2013). Clinical EFT as an evidence-based practice for the treatment of psychological and physiological conditions. *Psychology*, 4(8). Available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/PaperInformation.aspx?PaperID=35751#.VJS5OV4AKA>).

In 2022 I have been tasked by the American Psychological Association Division 12 Taskforce to conduct a systematic review on the effectiveness of EFT for trauma and PTSD. This is in line with their new guidelines and to establish the effectiveness of EFT to be listed on their website as 'evidence based'.

Comparison to Other Therapies

Head-to-head comparisons with a treatment that has strong empirical support is another way of investigating an emerging therapy. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and its variations are considered the "gold standard" for treating many psychological conditions. A total of 10 head-to-head studies compared CBT to a tapping protocol, and in all 10, the acupoint tapping outcomes were approximately equivalent or compared favourably with CBT.

Interestingly, tapping protocols are rapid compared with traditional treatments. The 2 outcome studies of EFT in the treatment of PTSD in combat veterans led to benefits on standardized self-report instruments that exceeded those generally found in CBT studies in speed, as well as the percentage of veterans no longer meeting the criteria for PTSD. The 3 head-to-head studies showed acupoint tapping brought about at least equivalent outcomes *in fewer sessions* than CBT.

Long Term Benefits

Of the 115 clinical trials of acupoint tapping in the Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology database, 79 did follow-up investigations (including 48 of the 64 RCTs and 31 of the 51 outcome studies that did not include a comparison condition). Of the 79 studies reporting follow-up, 77 found that “benefits were sustained.” This was defined as follow-up testing showing a statistically significant ($p < .05$) improvement between pre-treatment assessments and assessments at the end of the follow-up period in at least 1 major target for change being tracked. Follow-up periods ranged from 1 month to 2 years. The most frequent follow-up periods were 1 month (8 studies), 3 months (9 studies), 6 months (22 studies), and 12 months (10 studies), with a mean of 7 months. Since 97% of the studies that conducted follow-up found that at least 1 targeted change was sustained, the evidence suggests improvements are maintained.

Mechanisms of Action

The research indicates tapping sends signals that *deactivate* neural mechanisms that trigger undesirable emotions or behaviours. But tapping can also *activate* executive brain regions. Subjects in the PTSD studies frequently reported increased executive function post-treatment, such as an enhanced ability to concentrate. Increases in happiness and well-being have also been found on pre- to post-tapping self-report measures.

Acupuncture points that decrease arousal are called “sedating points.” Sedating points send deactivation signals to specific areas of the brain or body. Acupoints that increase arousal are called “strengthening points. Strengthening points send activation signals. While very few brain imaging studies on acupoint tapping have been conducted to date, preliminary data suggest that tapping on acupuncture points produces these sedating and/or stimulating effects in the management of cravings and fear.

Memory Reconsolidation

Within the reconsolidation framework, 3 basic strategies can be used by psychotherapists for facilitating a pivotal change in an outdated mental schema. The first is to find an experience from the client’s past that vividly contradicts the existing schema while that schema is still emotionally active. The second is to induce or access recent experiences that vividly contradict the old schema while it is still active. The third is to evoke a powerful positive emotion or bodily sensation that is different from what the old schema expects during the therapy session by working with the client’s transference, projections, or related dynamics. Each strategy, whether accomplished with or without the reconsolidation process in mind, requires considerable clinical acumen.

In tapping protocols, a different sequence is involved. A memory or situation that calls up an existing mental schema is brought to mind. The sensations and feelings evoked by this imaginal exposure are experienced, mindfully observed, and given a distress rating. The acupoint tapping then sends signals to the limbic system that markedly reduce the somatic and emotional responses. Now, with the old schema engaged or recently engaged (the “disconfirming experience” must occur within a relatively brief timeframe called the “reconsolidation window”), the client is no longer experiencing the sensations and feelings the schema expects or predicts. Tapping on either may lead to a fresh experience that is viscerally different from what the schema expects, leading to its revision. When the

conditions for reconsolidation are met (old schema active; disconfirming information prominently registered), the lessons of recent experiences can dislodge outdated, even deeply embedded old learning.

This reconsolidation sequence is initiated when what is experienced is not what was expected—a process neurologists call a prediction error—such as when the image of the spider does not produce panic due to the simultaneous tapping. The no-fear experience created during the tapping, after sufficient repetition, becomes the “new normal.”

Relevance of EFT Tapping to Eating Disorders

The research to date strongly suggests Tapping is an effective stress reduction (and trauma) technique. Thus, it is beneficial for parents and carers to use during times of stress related to an eating disorder sufferer.

The clinical trial research to date has mostly been in the addiction area of eating issues (BED, obesity, emotional eating) although practitioners have documented individual cases for Anorexia.

Studies demonstrate effectiveness for:

- Food cravings, weight loss in overweight/obese adults (including fMRI study, comparison to CBT, and online delivery, and 2-year followup)

See <https://iaap-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/aphw.12070>

<http://www.weightmanagementpsychology.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/12-month-EFT-Energy-Psychology.pdf>

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/acm.2019.0309>

<https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=98546>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1744388116301451>

- Unhealthy eating behaviours in adolescents
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550830715002190>
- Binge Eating Disorder -
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550830712001280>

Many case studies exist from the field of how EFT was used in the recovery process – see

https://www.eftuniverse.com/component/com_search/Itemid,3161/searchphrase,all/searchword,Anorexia/

https://www.eftuniverse.com/component/com_search/Itemid,3161/searchphrase,all/searchword,Bulimia/

<https://artofhealthyliving.com/how-tapping-helped-let-go-anorexia/>