

# Embodied Stress Relief



Embodied Stress Relief techniques capitalise on the well-established relationship between mind and body. Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) is one of these and has been formally recognised globally by a number of organisations including Veterans Affairs (USA), The Canadian Psychotherapy Association and The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (UK). Emotional Freedom Techniques;

1. is evidence-based;
2. is a true mind-body approach in that it includes direct interventions at the level of the body;
3. changes brain activity very rapidly;
4. has special advantages in quickly and permanently shifting outdated emotional learnings.

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## Embodied Stress Relief – Emotional Freedom Techniques

“Emotional Freedom Techniques,” or “EFT” is a psychophysiological technique that reduces stress.

Acupressure points on the face and upper body are stimulated in EFT by tapping on them with two fingers; usually the index and middle fingers – and it is commonly called “tapping” because of this.

EFT has been validated in more than 150 clinical trials, and Clinical EFT is the version validated in clinical trials that conform to the APA’s Division 12 (Clinical Psychology) standards for empirically supported treatments.

While initial explanations focused on the body’s “meridian” or energy system, tapping now has decades of clinical trials and research and these show this tapping technique has profound effects on the nervous system, the production of stress hormones (particularly cortisol), DNA regulation, and brain activation.

Tapping can be used to change distressing or negative feelings, self-limiting thoughts, or behaviours as well as to instil more positive emotional states, beliefs, or goals.

EFT appears to affect the amygdala (the stress centre in the brain) and hippocampus (the memory centre), and both play a role in the decision process when you decide if something is a threat. EFT has also been shown to lower cortisol levels, the stress hormone, and activity in the amygdala.

Meta-analyses of EFT for anxiety, depression, and PTSD indicate treatment effects that exceed those of psychopharmacology and conventional psychotherapy, and all found large effect sizes (Cohen’s  $d$  or Hedge’s  $g$  above 0.8).

*(Further information – In the meta-analysis investigating anxiety, 14 clinical trials applying acupoint tapping protocols included 658 participants (Clond, 2016). The overall effect size for these 14 studies was 1.23. An effect size shows the magnitude of the outcome produced by an intervention. An effect size of .5 is considered a medium effect and .8 or above is considered a large effect, so 1.23 is definitely a large effect. In the meta-analysis investigating the treatment of depression (Nelms & Castel, 2016), 12 studies, including 398 participants, had an overall effect size of 1.85, again a large effect. The PTSD meta-analysis (Sebastian & Nelms, 2017) evaluated seven studies which included 247 participants and had an effect size of 2.96, an unusually large effect).*

Six comparative studies and a meta-analysis have addressed whether acupoint tapping is an essential ingredient for the favorable outcomes reported following EFT treatments, or whether the cognitive, exposure, and non-specific therapeutic elements of the protocol are the primary active ingredients. Otherwise identical protocols with and without the acupoint tapping component were compared, and those which included tapping produced a larger effect size than those with the other components but without tapping.

## EFT has rapid results:

- Randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that tapping effectively treats phobias and some anxiety disorders in one session (1 hour)
- Significant decreases in cortisol and normalization of the EEG frequencies associated with stress also occur after 1 hour, *and stay changed*.
- Functional MRI studies of tapping for food cravings indicate a significant lack of brain activation after 4 sessions (8 hours)
- Several studies show a substantial reduction in PTSD / trauma symptoms and often an absence of diagnosis after just 6 hours of tapping.

Reduced cortisol levels (Church et al., 2012, Stapleton et al., 2020), desirable changes in gene expression (Maharaj, 2016), and normalization of EEG patterns (Craig et al, 2008; Lambrou et al., 2003) reached statistical significance following a single acupoint tapping session of 30 to 60 minutes. A single tapping session also resulted in statistically significant or client-reported therapeutic gains in the symptoms of frozen shoulder (Church & Nelms, 2016), the fear of small animals (Baker & Siegel, 2010; Wells et al., 2003), claustrophobia (Lambrou et al., 2003), other specific phobias (Salas et al., 2011), insomnia (Church, 2013), and even PTSD (Church, Piña, Reategui, & Brooks, 2011; Connolly & Sakai, 2011; Connolly, Roe-Sepowitz, Sakai, & Edwards, 2013; Sakai, Connolly, & Oas, 2010).

## Comparison to Gold Standards:

Nine head-to-head studies have compared CBT to an acupoint tapping protocol. In all nine, the acupoint tapping outcomes were approximately equivalent or compared favorably to CBT. Eight of the nine were peer-reviewed and seven of the nine were RCTs.

Tapping has been tested against gold standard therapies – for test anxiety rapid benefits were observed in 2 sessions of tapping compared to 5 sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. For obese adults, an 8-week tapping program eliminated all food cravings and related eating issues, where CBT took 6 months.

## Acupuncture basis:

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 on various brain areas (Hui et al., 2000, Hui et al., 2005, Dhond et al., 2007). The investigators found that the stimulation of certain acupuncture points sends signals to the amygdala that reduce threat activation almost instantly. With little talk, this somatic intervention can quickly turn off hyperarousal, a state of high alert, in the limbic system. Because hyperarousal is the neurological 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 (Healthline, 2017)—the implications of this finding for clinicians are substantial. It suggests the possibility of a rapid intervention for deactivating the fight/flight/freeze response in situations, real or imagined, in which high alert is not adaptive. Energy psychology protocols take advantage of this possibility.

## Further reading – an excerpt from TEDx talk by Dr Peta Stapleton or link to recording [here](#):

There are 3 distinct things that distinguish tapping as a 4th wave therapy:

1. It is a true mind-body approach in that it includes direct interventions at the level of the body;
2. It changes brain activity very rapidly;
3. And it has special advantages in quickly and permanently shifting outdated emotional learnings.

Let's look at these:

Therapists who are effective in working with people who have been traumatized have long recognized that talk therapies are not enough for healing the damage that is caused by abuse and catastrophe

### 1. Firstly tapping is somatic not a cognitive therapy.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk (Harvard psychiatrist and author of “The Body Keeps the Score,”) suggested the physiological changes to the body and brain following trauma become “encoded in the viscera” (the body) and require treatments that “engage the safety system of the brain before trying to promote new ways of thinking.”

So effective therapies for severe trauma must address the body *as well as the mind*.

Indeed the early neuroimaging studies of PTSD showed that, during exposure to a traumatic script, there was decreased Broca's area functioning (the speech area) and increased activation of areas in the right hemisphere related to emotion (slides). Van der Kolk said traumatized individuals would not be able to verbalize what they were experiencing, particularly when they become emotionally aroused. They would be too aroused to communicate, let alone process anything.

Simply put, perhaps talk therapy by itself, even in the context of a warm, supportive therapeutic relationship, isn't enough to reverse the profound physical and emotional conditions in people with a history of trauma.

According to van der Kolk, making meaning of a traumatic experience is also usually not enough to process it, and let it go. People need to have experiences that directly *contradict* the traumatic states of emotional helplessness and physical paralysis. They need to re-experience the event *without feeling helpless and this is exactly what tapping does*.

Somatic therapies are producing benefits that traditional insight-oriented therapies are not. While tapping has someone focus on the distress (even if that is a body sensation or a thought), it is the somatic aspect of tapping that creates the decrease in amygdala and cortisol activity, resulting in calm. This very state of calm is a contradictory state to that of distress or trauma.

## 2. The second point is that tapping has rapid results.

A decade-long research program at Harvard Medical School looking at what happens in the body when various acupuncture points are stimulated found that certain points almost instantly decrease the activation of the stress response in the brain. The capacity to rapidly reduce the stress response is a cornerstone in the speed and effectiveness of tapping.

Randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that tapping effectively treats phobias and some anxiety disorders in one session. Significant decreases in cortisol and normalization of the EEG frequencies associated with stress also occur after 1 hour, *and stay changed*. Functional MRI studies of tapping for food cravings indicate a significant lack of brain activation after 4 sessions.

Several studies show a substantial reduction in PTSD/trauma symptoms and often an absence of diagnosis after just 6 hours of tapping. When gold standard approaches recommend 12 to 18 sessions, and tapping achieves the same outcomes in considerably less, the question might be – are all therapies really equal?

Tapping has been tested against gold standard therapies – for test anxiety rapid benefits were observed in 2 sessions of tapping compared to 5 sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. For obese adults, an 8-week tapping program eliminated all food cravings and related eating issues, where CBT took 6 months.

**3. The third point is that tapping changes your response permanently.** The rapid response of tapping, combined with the brain's capacity to reprogram itself occurs through a process called "memory reconsolidation".

A unique feature of tapping is that the benefits appear to last well into the future without further treatment. Typically, we might expect that when exposed to the same situation in the future (e.g., seeing a spider), you would have to engage in tapping again to send the deactivating signal back to the brain.

But new research is showing that despite a lifetime of deep emotional learnings, the brain has a mechanism for "updating existing learnings with new ones", and core beliefs from childhood can be modified, strengthened, changed or even erased! Neural pathways appear able to change but you need to do 3 things:

1. vividly access the old memory/feeling and feel it now;
2. experience both the old memory/feeling, and a contrary state at the same time (called a "juxtaposition experience");
3. repeat this several times.

In tapping step one occurs when the person states their concern in the setup statement. By acknowledging the problem and not reframing it or thinking more positively, we vividly access it.

In step 2, the somatic tapping reduces the emotional distress and the brain therefore, experiences a contradictory situation. An image or thought that was previously distressing is now no longer felt this way and thus the neural pathway maintaining the old learning can be transformed by the new experience – which is calm.

In step 3, the repetition phase, is vital for the contradiction phase to become permanent. The repeated rounds of tapping also serve to identify additional aspects of the issue and process historical contributions.

At no point is it suggested that tapping erases any learnings. Nor does it delete what actually happened. But the deactivating signal it sends to the emotional centres of the brain allow someone to remember what happened – without distress.

The final outcome is that unhealthy responses to triggers, such as to the tone of your boss' voice or a memory from 20 years ago, can be rapidly and permanently eliminated. And who wouldn't want that?

So, tapping on acupressure points may look different to traditional approaches, but it appears unusually rapid and effective in relation to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Wave therapies. The body of psychological and physiological research may be worth reviewing.

**If clients could recover from their distress in half the time and cost, wouldn't we consider that true emotional freedom?**

FURTHER DETAILS ON THE WORK OF THE MIND HEART CONNECT FOUNDATION

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