

ENERGY PSYCHOLOGY: THE INSTANT CURE?

A New Paradigm

David Feinstein, Ph.D.

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Summary: This article introduces health professionals who work with psychological issues to the emerging field of energy psychology. It provides an overview of the field, covering basic concepts and procedures. It is intended to give the reader a basis to begin evaluating this new paradigm. Research and clinical evidence bearing upon clinical efficacy are presented, and plausible neurological mechanisms are discussed. The article gives a brief history of the field, mentions various energy psychology protocols, discusses indications and contraindications for clinical applications, and demonstrates a standard clinical protocol through the presentation of four case studies.

When James Reston, a New York Times reporter accompanying Henry Kissinger on a visit to Communist China in July 1971 had an acute appendicitis attack, Chinese physicians performed an emergency operation to remove Reston's appendix. His postoperative abdominal pain was successfully treated with acupuncture, a routine procedure in many Chinese hospitals. The publicity surrounding Reston's treatment, including a front page article in the Times, is credited with opening Western minds to the practice of acupuncture. Today the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture has more than 1600 physician members, and the World Health Organization lists more than 50 conditions for which acupuncture is believed to be effective.

Since the early 1980s, Western mental health practitioners have been developing protocols for applying the principles of acupuncture to psychological issues ([Gallo, 2004](#)), patterned initially on the work of California psychologist Roger Callahan and Australian psychiatrist John Diamond. Acupuncture points can be stimulated for therapeutic effect through the use of needles or heat, but less invasive procedures—such as tapping or massaging points on the surface of the skin—have also been found to produce therapeutic outcomes. This allows a broader range of practitioners to use the approach, and it allows clients to self-administer the methods back home, in conjunction with the therapy.

Because the stimulation of acupuncture points produces physical change by altering the body's electrical activity ([Cho et al., 1998](#)), the various mental health protocols that utilize acupuncture points (such as "Thought Field Therapy," "Emotional Freedom Techniques," and "Energy Diagnostic and Treatment Methods") are collectively known as "energy psychology." Energy psychology protocols generally combine the stimulation of particular electromagnetically responsive areas on the surface of the skin ([Voll et al., 1983](#)) with methods from Cognitive Behavior Therapy, including the use of imagery, self-statements, and subjective distress ratings.

Few treatment approaches have engendered more skepticism in the therapeutic community than those proffered by energy psychology. Claims of near-instant, lasting cures with recalcitrant problems using interventions that look patently absurd and seem inexplicable have triggered skepticism in virtually every clinician who first encounters them. At the same time, growing numbers of therapists representing a wide range of theoretical backgrounds have been trained in these methods (the Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology, for instance, has more than 600 professional members, see <http://energypsych.org/>) and have found that, however mysterious the

mechanism of change, the approach can yield surprisingly powerful results with certain problems.

In fact, the mechanisms by which the basic procedure—tapping specific points on the skin while mentally activating a dysfunctional emotional response—may not be as incomprehensible as first appears. Energy psychology may work by producing neurological shifts in brain functioning in much the same way as neurofeedback training, a treatment that is increasingly being used for problems ranging from learning disabilities to anxiety disorders to depression to addictions ([Evans & Abarbanel, 1999](#)). Unlike psychiatric medication, which catalyzes changes through its effects on the brain's biochemistry, both energy psychology techniques and neurofeedback training have been shown to bring about changes in brain wave patterns, and these changes correspond with a reduction of symptoms (to see digitized EEG images taken before and after energy psychology treatments, visit http://www.innersource.net/energy_psych/epi_neuro_foundations.htm).

A difference between the two approaches is that neurofeedback relies on scientific instrumentation while energy psychology does not. Although this makes energy psychology more readily accessible, it perhaps makes neurofeedback training more palatable to the professional community. In addition, the explanations used in energy psychology for the reported treatment outcomes fall outside our familiar paradigms. They make no sense if we try to understand them in terms of conventional explanatory mechanisms, such as insight, cognitive restructuring, focused mental activities, reward and punishment, or the curative power of the therapeutic relationship. But if we examine the electrochemical shifts in the brain that are brought about by stimulating electrically inductive points on the skin, a coherent picture begins to emerge.

Research studies have shown that acupuncture points are more electrically responsive than other areas of the skin (which have 20 to 30 times the electrical resistance). Studies have also indicated that acupuncture points have a higher concentration of receptors sensitive to mechanical stimulation. In energy psychology, a subset of acupuncture points is stimulated, usually by tapping them while mentally activating a dysfunctional emotional response. Tapping specific acupuncture points sends signals to the brain ([Cho et al., 1998](#)), and these signals appear to be similar to those produced by the more traditional use of needles. Various studies have demonstrated that the stimulation of selected acupuncture points modulates the activities of the limbic system and other brain structures that are involved in the experiences of fear and pain ([Hui et al., 2000](#)).

The most promising hypothesis by which energy psychology achieves its effects, I feel, has been proposed by Joaquín Andrade, a physician who works with anxiety and other psychiatric disorders, and who has also utilized acupuncture in his practice for more than 30 years. Andrade traces the consequences of activating a disturbing memory while sending electrical impulses to responsive areas of the limbic system through acupoint stimulation ([Andrade & Feinstein, 2004](#)). As Joseph LeDoux's ([Nader et al., 2000](#)) research program at the Center for Neural Science at NYU has demonstrated, any time a fearful memory is brought to mind, the neural connections between the fearful image and the emotional response may be increased or decreased. The memory becomes susceptible when activated to being neurologically consolidated in a new way—its emotional power either reinforced or dissipated in the process. In energy psychology treatments, it may be that the established ability of acupuncture to deactivate areas of the brain which are involved in the experiences of fear and pain, apparently takes hold during this moment of "neural activation."