

EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques): Background and Applications

Masha Bennett

My recent Wired In blog on the use of EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques) for relief of cravings has generated a bit of interest, and that prompted me to put together some additional information on the background and applications of this therapeutic tool.

EFT is a brief therapeutic intervention and a self-help tool developed in 1990s by Gary Craig, an engineer and a personal development coach, from the work of Dr Roger Callahan on Thought Field Therapy. EFT is typically seen as a complementary therapy, and is sometimes called "acupuncture without needles" or "emotional form of acupuncture", but I prefer to see it as a powerful psychotherapeutic approach, which has the benefit of being "portable", with clients being able to use it for themselves independently.

I am passionate about introducing EFT to the recovery field, as I believe it can truly revolutionise addiction treatment, empowering both clients and staff, relieving both physical and emotional pain, and giving people practical tools to help themselves.

In addiction treatment field, EFT can be used in the following ways:

- Alleviating withdrawal symptoms
- Gaining relief from cravings (literally in minutes)
- Healing past traumas
- Enhancing self-awareness
- Managing anxiety, fear, grief, anger, guilt, shame
- Addressing negative and irrational thinking
- Enhancing sense of control
- Reducing risk of relapse.

It is also a fabulous stress management and personal development tool for workers and carers. Does all this sound too good to be true? I certainly used to think that too.

I came across EFT some years ago on a training course, where another fellow student enthusiastically told me about a new technique he had discovered. Polite but reserved, I agreed to be the "guinea pig" for the EFT demonstration, and when it was completed a couple of minutes later, I was puzzled and a little irritated. There was absolutely no way that the odd-looking procedure could have any impact

on my issue (instructed by my colleague to be as specific as possible, I focused on an emotional reaction which I found impossible to control, despite years of applying what I saw as the most sophisticated psychological tools). I forgot about this experience almost immediately... That is, until about 5 weeks later, when I became aware that my problem had disappeared.

At the time, I was employed as a drug worker and, a little later, drug treatment manager at a women's prison, and, having gained more experience with EFT, I was enthusiastic about teaching it to both prisoners and staff.

One of the Listeners I taught EFT (as you may know, Listeners are prisoners trained by Samaritans who "listen" to other prisoners in distress) wrote a note to me to say that the two women she had demonstrated EFT to had been able to stop self-harming. Another woman was astonished how quickly the technique had helped her to relieve the overwhelming negative emotions associated with the break-up of her relationship. I saw prisoners use the technique for relief from anger, anxiety, and pains and aches associated with withdrawal.

One of the girls cured herself of obsessive-compulsive cleaning rituals, without anyone's help (if any psychiatrists are reading this, they will probably think that this is nonsense, as OCD is quite a challenging condition to treat, even for experienced professionals). Yet another wrote me a passionate note to say that in 16 years of seeing doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, EFT helped her more than anything else to deal with her severe childhood traumas. She wanted the prison governor - and the world - to see her letter.

Like me, most addiction professionals, as well as substance users, who first learn the EFT technique are sceptical. It is a rather peculiar-looking procedure, with a series of acupressure points stimulated by tapping with the fingertips, and specially worded affirmations which are typically said out loud. Some may have seen Paula McKenna use a similar technique on TV and associate it with "stage hypnosis" or "trickery".

There are some beginnings of scientific research that show promising results with EFT even though it is difficult to conduct controlled studies of these types of therapies. Some references and abstract to papers on EFT can be found here <http://www.eft4addictions.co.uk/pages/research.php>.

Data on specific applications of EFT for addictions is rather scarce, with only one research paper published on the subject (Church, 2008), though there are numerous case studies reported on the main EFT website, www.emofree.com, and addiction-related EFT stories appear in the press every now and again (e.g. Hamilton, 2009).

I am especially excited, however, about the possibilities of using EFT for treatment of trauma, with an increasing number of reports published on successful outcomes with PTSD for combat veterans and disaster survivors (Church, 2009; Craig, 2009; www.wiredin.org.uk © Wired In 2009

Feinstein, 2008b, The Herald, 2007). To me, this aspect of work is of vital importance as so often we find traumatic past experiences to be one of the important causal or maintaining factors in addictions.

It is still not clear how EFT achieves results, which are often rapid and dramatic (though by no means all cases are a "one-minute wonder", some require persistence and hard work). Most EFT Practitioners rely on the explanation based on the meridian system, and balancing the chi in relation to a specific issue/problem, as in acupuncture, but for many health professionals I work with and come into contact with this sounds like a lot of mumbo-jumbo.

There are a number of other theories, none of them proven, how EFT may work. For example, Argentinean Dr Andrade who conducted EFT trials with thousands of anxiety patients with some promising results, and David Feinstein proposed a neurological explanation (Feinstein, 2008a). The acupuncture/acupressure points have a particularly high concentration of mechanoreceptors and free nerve endings. It appears that the signal that is generated when tapping eventually reaches the amygdala, hippocampus, and other parts of the limbic system where the emotional problem "resides" (and which plays such an important part in addictions), whilst the problem is "activated" through imaginal exposure (with the individual focusing on the issue in their mind) – with the tapping signal seemingly disrupting established patterns, and the hyper-arousal is thus reduced. Enhanced serotonin production is also associated with tapping the acupressure points.

If this sounds like a sales pitch, I will not make an apology for it – I do want to sell EFT to the recovery community, as I dream of it being freely available and accessible to everyone who wants to use it (and not everyone will want to, as it is true that no individual tool or approach suits everybody). More research is urgently needed in this area, and if any treatment agencies are interested in taking part in a study on EFT as a therapeutic intervention, I would be delighted to hear from you.

References

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