

ACEP RESEARCH DAY – MAY 30, 2024 – KEYNOTE HANDOUT

A Blistering Critique of Energy Psychology and How I Responded

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Presentation Description:

A small victory for Energy Psychology in 2023 was when one of the APA's top clinical journals published a paper I'd written called "Integrating the Manual Stimulation of Acupuncture Points into Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review with Clinical Recommendations."

However, one of the low points of the past year for us as a profession was related to that same paper. A blistering commentary on it was written by three prominent psychologists, accepted by the same influential journal, and distributed on Google Scholar and then a journal article pre-print site well ahead of publication (or chance for rebuttal).

The commentary concluded that "EFT is not compatible with ethical practice in behavioral health." Along the way, it attacked the validity of the evidence base that we at ACEP claim shows Energy Psychology to be unusually powerful. It condemned our explanations about why tapping works.

The critique is erudite and well-pedigreed. I not only felt devastated when I first read it, I had been in a constructive dialogue with two leaders within clinical psychology who abruptly cut off all communication with me shortly after the critique was posted and distributed widely. Coincidence? By March 2024, more than 600 people had viewed the pre-print, with nothing countering it.

In this talk, I will (1) go over the main assertions in the critique, which reflect the opinions of many of our colleagues, (2) explain the rationale for each assertion, and (3) then one by one, unmask, with evidence, the erroneous assumptions that are at the base of each major assertion. If you are advocating energy psychology, particularly in a conventional health or mental health setting, you may find yourself having to field similar challenges.

On the following pages, you will see an abstract of the original paper, an abstract of the critique, and an abstract of and link to my rebuttal of the critique.

THE ORIGINAL PAPER:

Integrating the Manual Stimulation of Acupuncture Points into Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review with Clinical Recommendations

David Feinstein

Abstract

The integration into psychotherapy of protocols using the stimulation of acupuncture points by tapping on them, a form of acupressure, is increasingly appearing in clinical practice. An underlying premise is that the procedure generates activating and deactivating signals which, in real time, impact brain areas aroused by a client's focus of attention. This makes it possible for a therapist to rapidly facilitate cognitive and neurological changes by shifting the wording and images that accompany the tapping. The approach has been controversial, with both enthusiastic proponents and adamant critics. A total of 309 peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles have focused on this development. The aim of this article is to put these reports into context using a "hierarchy of evidence" model. In a hierarchy of evidence, judgments about the efficacy of a clinical approach are formed according to the relative strength of the types of studies supporting the method. The hierarchy of evidence for psychotherapies that use tapping on acupuncture points includes 28 systematic reviews or meta-analyses, 125 clinical trials, 24 case studies, 26 reports describing systematic observations, 17 mixed-method clinical trials that included a tapping component, and 88 articles addressing clinical procedures, theory, mechanisms, or related issues. Consistency in positive outcomes following the tapping of selected acupuncture points for a range of conditions was identified and weaknesses in study designs discussed. Mechanisms of action are briefly considered and suggestions for integrating acupoint tapping protocols into clinical practice are presented. The article concludes that although further research is needed, the growing evidence base documenting the effectiveness, speed, and durability of the approach appears promising.

Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 33(1), 47–67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/int0000283>

THE CRITIQUE:

Acupressure in Psychotherapy as an Unsinkable Rubber Duck: A Reply to Feinstein

Cassandra L. Boness, Rory Pfund, & David F. Tolin

Abstract

In a recent publication entitled “Integrating the Manual Stimulation of Acupuncture Points Into Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review with Clinical Recommendations,” appearing in this journal, Feinstein (2023) aims to aggregate the evidence on Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) across the “hierarchy of evidence.” EFT is based on the premise that tapping facilitates alterations in “energy meridians” and that these alterations reduce psychological symptoms or disorders. This commentary addresses several concerns with the Feinstein (2023) review including the pseudoscientific concept of energy meridians, the lack of evidence that tapping on acupressure points is the active ingredient that resolves psychological disorders, serious methodological flaws with EFT research, and the incompatibility of EFT with the ethical practice of psychology. Thus, we disagree with Feinstein’s (2023) conclusion that “The body of research on acupoint tapping that has emerged over the past two decades and the increasing quality of the study designs appears promising” (p. 61) and instead argue that EFT represents a pseudoscientific, “unsinkable rubber duck” (i.e., a belief that people continue to hold despite evidence to the contrary).

MY RESPONSE:

The Real Reasons Energy Psychology Is Proving to Be Durable: Rejoinder to “Acupressure in Psychotherapy as an Unsinkable Rubber Duck, Reply to Feinstein (2023)”

David Feinstein

Abstract

In a blistering critique of Feinstein (2023) and the practice of energy psychology in general, Boness et al. (this issue) address four concerns, asserting that: (1) the rationale for energy psychology is based on premises that are not supported by reliable evidence; (2) the claim that tapping on acupuncture points is an active ingredient in energy psychology is based on insufficient evidence; (3) the quality of efficacy evidence is low; and (4) the approach is not compatible with ethical practice. While acknowledging the validity of several of the commentators’ points, this rejoinder provides evidence that soundly refutes each of these assertions. It concludes that Boness et al. “have provided a scholarly commentary on energy psychology as the field’s evidence base arguably existed a decade ago and represent it as being current while neglecting the compelling efficacy evidence that has been published in the most recent decade.”

You can read the full rejoinder at <https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/ysg6u>