British Gestalt Journal
2018, Vol. 27, No. 2, 30–36

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# A Gestalt perspective on Energy Psychotherapy

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Received 3 July 2018

**Abstract:** In this paper I introduce ideas and practices from Energy Psychology and reflect on how my practice as an Energy Psychotherapist is supported by my Gestalt roots.

*Keywords:* chakra, Energy Psychology, Energy Psychotherapy, energetic field, energetic release, intention, meridians, muscle testing, obstacles to change, subtle energy, trauma.

Over the last eight years I have been exploring and integrating Energy Psychology (EP) methods into my therapeutic practice. My interest in this was initially sparked during Gestalt conferences: Christine Whaite offering a group experience of tuning into the flow of energy between us as we held hands in a circle, Peter Philippson demonstrating the power of intention from his Aikido practice, Janice Scott giving a presentation on Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). My exploration of EP has been in the context of a small but growing movement to integrate these methods into psychotherapeutic practice. In this country this has developed into the Energy Psychotherapy Network which encourages those with existing qualifications in the counselling professions to learn and integrate these new methods into their core modality and make them their own. This network grew out of the pioneering work of Phil Mollon, a clinical psychologist and Freudian psychoanalyst who has studied many of these EP methods and found it to be his 'role to take these modalities beyond the way they were taught as "techniques" and incorporate them more integratively into depth psychology' (Mollon, 2018, p. 14).

Incorporating EP techniques into my practice has changed the way that I work. Some of the concepts and practices and the techniques of EP (the tapping of meridians, the holding of chakras, repetitions of phrases and muscle testing), appear to be almost polar opposites of the Gestalt focus on the 'I –Thou' relationship. However, once therapist and client are comfortable with using these tools, the mechanics of these interventions recedes into the 'ground' and there can be a deep sense of connection in a shared energetic field. I chose to train as a Gestalt therapist because I was attracted to a form of therapy which takes the body seriously, is optimistic about the human potential for creative adjustment, does not pathologise, is responsive to the variety of human experience and is open to a spiritual dimension. I find these same elements to be even more fully present in Energy Psychotherapy.

In this article I first introduce EP's history, concepts and practices and the cutting edge science which supports them. I draw heavily here on the writings of Mollon (2008) and Feinstein (2004). I then offer my own reflections and experience of integrating EP into my Gestalt roots.

## Introduction to Energy Psychology

EP shares an understanding of the body's energy system with Energy Healing, such as in the Barbara Brennen (1987) model of hands-on healing through the human energy field, and with Donna Eden's Energy Medicine (1998), but it differs from both these in that the therapist is not working hands-on with the client (except sometimes for brief contact during muscle testing) and there is more focus on the psychological process. Energy Medicine exercises are often used to prepare the system to work with EP methods.

The term Energy Psychology was coined by Fred Gallo in the 1990s (Gallo, 1999). This field of study has developed experimentally with the introduction of Eastern ideas about how energy moves in the body into the process of facilitating greater psychological well-being. EP is now developing a substantial evidence base which is being drawn together by the US-based Association of Comprehensive Energy Psychology (ACEP). Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), which involves tapping on meridian points used in acupuncture, is the most studied intervention as it lends itself most easily to random controlled trials. In one such study, researchers measured levels of the stress hormone cortisol before and after treatment. Eighty-three participants were divided into three groups: the first group received an hour of EFT tapping, the second group received an hour of 'talk

therapy', the third group received no treatment. The EFT tapping group demonstrated a 24% decrease in cortisol levels, which was significantly better than the second and third groups who showed the regular decrease in cortisol levels that happens over time. In the UK, Staffordshire University has been pioneering research with the NHS on the effectiveness of EFT with promising results (Boath et al., 2012). There has also been growing evidence that acupuncture treatments can control autonomic nervous system functions and balance sympathetic and parasympathetic activity (Li et al., 2013). It is likely that the observed calming effect of stimulating acupressure points by tapping has a similar mechanism.

EP has many variants but its underlying discovery is that thought affects the body's subtle energy system (chakras, meridians, biofield) just as disturbances in that system also lead to disturbances in thought and other psychological processes.

This two-way effect is the domain of EP. The field's promise is in its claim to have developed a set of readily accessible procedures for assessing and shifting the energies that are believed to maintain dysfunctional habits of thought, emotion and behaviour (Feinstein, 2004, p. 217).

The founding story of EP is of a spontaneous experiment in 1979. Roger Callahan, a psychologist practising in California, had become interested in the work of George Goodheart, a chiropractor who developed Applied Kinesiology and who had also begun to explore ideas from Chinese medicine. Callahan had a patient called Mary with a severe water phobia which had proved to be resistant to all his existing methods of treatment. One day she was complaining of the discomfort she felt in her stomach when she was in the vicinity of water. Callahan had learnt from Goodheart of the associations between the meridians and emotion. He suggested to Mary that she tap on the end of her stomach meridian which is just under the eye and has an association with anxiety and fear. To his astonishment, Mary leapt to her feet and said 'It's gone!' – the anxiety she had always experienced in her stomach had suddenly been released, and it did not return. Other patients did not respond as miraculously to tapping on a single meridian point, but Callahan developed a sophisticated system using muscle testing derived from Applied Kinesiology to discern the meridian points that should be tapped and the order in which they should be tapped while the patient focused on the 'thought field' of the problem issue. Callahan called this treatment Thought Field Therapy and he had considerable success in helping a wide range of patients (Callahan, 1981).

Gary Craig, who was one of Callahan's students, suggested that meridian tapping could be taught much more simply by leaving out the carefully discerned sequencing of meridian tapping points and tapping instead on the end points of all the meridians in the same sequence. He called this simplified method 'Emotional Freedom Technique'. EFT has been widely disseminated by Gary Craig and others as a self-help tool and there are many videos teaching it on the internet. Some of these are over enthusiastic in the promises they make, are linked to websites that are aggressively selling products and emphasise EFT as technique. By contrast, Judy Byrne, who is a psychotherapist, teaches the method very simply and clearly. She makes a nice distinction between the way EFT can be used as a self-help tool and the way it can be developed in the context of a therapeutic relationship and she demonstrates self-help EFT on a YouTube video.

Many other therapeutic modalities have developed which involve tapping or holding acupressure meridian points or chakra energy centres while the client thinks of a target troublesome thought or memory. While doing this, after suitable preparation, the emotional distress is dissipated, allowing for a more positive and connected state of being. Some EP methods use focused intention alone to move energy and do not rely on physical holding or tapping.

## Energy – what energy?

Some believe that these methods are based on strange theories about mysterious energy fields. They are not. The EP methods are based on investigations, using simple and replicable procedures of that area of reality that is known as the energy system. It is not a hypothetical realm but one that is palpable and observable – and when certain procedures are followed, a distressed, traumatised or anxious person will experience relief (Mollon, 2008, p. 291).

There are thought to be two distinct forms of energy that are involved in EP: electromagnetic energy and subtle energy. Electromagnetic energy in the body is relatively well understood. Our brains and nervous systems contain hundreds of billions of neurons that each connect electrochemically with thousands of other neurons, creating an incomprehensibly complex electrical system. Wherever there is an electrical current it creates and is surrounded by an electromagnetic field. Each cell of the body functions like a miniature battery with chemical reactions producing electrical current and an electromagnetic field and there are trillions of these 'batteries' in our bodies. Instruments for measuring our electrical and electromagnetic energies are well established.

'Subtle energy' is the name given to energy that is activated by the mind and can affect physical matter. Such energy is recognised in many cultures around the

world. Qi, the basis for acupuncture, is best known in the West, but other examples include prana (India and Tibet), ki (Japan), and baraka (in Sufisim). Our current scientific paradigm cannot account for phenomena attributed to these energies but there are now many controlled studies which demonstrate 'the physical impact from a distance of visualisation and prayer on people, animals, plants, organs, blood and cells (Benor, 2001)' (Feinstein, 2004, p. 7). More recent experiments by William Tiller have demonstrated the existence of magnetic 'information waves' that can be modulated by human intention, so offering a mechanism by which mind can affect matter.

William Tiller is a Professor of Material Science at Stanford who became interested in investigating parapsychological and spiritual-related phenomena which are not explained by science. Tiller's view was that if the present scientific paradigm does not allow for human consciousness, emotion or intention to affect matter, then it is time to change the paradigm. His experimental work has revealed the existence of two unique levels of physical reality. These he describes as '(1) our conventional, particulate, electrical, atom/molecular level and (2) a new magnetic information wave level that has much in common with the old "ether" concept of the 1800's' (Tiller, 2007, p. xv). He says that a coupling medium of a still higher dimensional nature is required to allow these two levels of physical reality to interact meaningfully. It is the level (2) aspect of physical reality which 'is modulate-able by human consciousness, intention, emotion, mind and spirit!' (Tiller, 2007, pp. xv–xvi). Most crucially for EP, Tiller finds that the human subtle energy system (meridians, chakras and the biofield) is the required 'coupler system' between the two levels of reality.

## The tools of Energy Psychology

*Muscle testing (MT)*, derived from Applied Kinesiology, is also known as Energy testing, and is used in many, but not all, EP modalities to make enquiries of the client's embodied self. This can be done in a number of ways but a common method is for the client to hold out an arm parallel with the floor while making a statement. The therapist applies gentle pressure to the wrist. A firm response from the muscle indicates that the client is coherent with what has been stated while a slack response indicates a lack of coherence. Greater subtlety beyond a yes/no response can also be discerned by therapist and client together listening to the muscle tone. Muscle testing can be used to guide the work, to check its progress, to confirm hunches and to identify the earliest origins of a current issue.

Anne Jensen has recently completed a DPhil in the Oxford University Department for Evidence-Based Medicine for her research on the accuracy and precision of kinesiology-style manual muscle response testing. She repeatedly found MT to be more accurate than chance or intuition in distinguishing lies from truth, but interestingly she also found that 'practitioners appear to be an integral part of the MRT dynamic because when replaced by a mechanical device, distinguishing Lies from Truth was not possible' (Jensen, 2016).

While distinguishing between lies and truth is still a long way from the use of MT to discern what is not consciously known to either tester or tested, the research does help build confidence in MT and in the client–therapist energetic field in which it is practised (Jensen, 2016; 2017).

*Intention* is another important concept in EP. This is not meant in the sense of a strong purpose with a sharply focused determination to obtain a particular result, but rather as 'an openness to the healing and transforming energetic forces in the infinite field of unlimited possibilities' (Brockman, 2006, pp. 72–73). It is a common practice when working with EP to articulate a positive intention and then identify and work with the blocking beliefs and life experiences which are standing in the way of fulfilling the intention.

Tiller's experimental work provides support for the idea that human thought, emotion, expectation and intention can affect matter. This has long been recognised in the 'placebo effect', albeit very negatively as a minor problem complicating research into new treatments. But we can also take this wonderful capacity for believing ourselves into health seriously as a positive force to be explored and reinforced rather than a minor distraction to be disparaged.

Bruce Lipton is a cell biologist whose early work on stem cells (Lipton, 1977) led him to recognise that environment has a much greater impact on how cells develop than DNA. His research supports the contention that mind does affect matter in a quantum mechanical universe where non-localised energy can interact with matter (Lipton, 2016, p. 131).

*Energetic release:* When working with EP methods, we are intending to facilitate a process of energetic release. This can be evidenced by spontaneous tears or sighs or laughter and surprisingly often by deep and repeated yawning. What is particularly interesting about such yawning is that it can start either with the client or with the therapist and generally will include both. Many neurochemicals are involved in yawning and Newberg suggests that 'yawning may be the brain's attempt to eliminate symptoms by readjusting neural function' (Newberg and Waldman, 2009, p. 158).

## Reflections on Energy Psychology and Gestalt

*Field approach:* Gestalt therapy and EP share a 'field' approach which has its roots in modern physics:

> Gestalt therapy ... has moved further and faster than many other approaches in psychotherapy towards embracing the kind of holistic thinking that derives from the new cosmology, which takes its lead from modern physics and astronomy ... that permit(s) us at least to speculate about moving fields of energy, continuous change, uncertainty, and an unfixed, constantly readjusting universe. (Parlett, 2000, p. 18)

Gestalt therapy relates to the concept of 'field' primarily as a metaphor for how we connect with one another and with the wider context in which we find ourselves. This frame encourages a flexibility in thinking and doing that aims to break down 'fixed gestalts', or rigid patterns of behaviour developed in response to past field conditions. It supports a concept of 'self' that is dynamic and changing, more verb than noun, ideally responding flexibly to each new situation.

EP takes the energetic 'field' much more literally: 'The Universe is one indivisible, dynamic whole in which energy and matter are so deeply entangled it is impossible to consider them as independent elements' (Lipton, 2016, p. 89). Energy can fully influence matter and our individual wave-like vibrations have a direct impact upon one another. This more literal understanding of the energetic field suggests the possibility of interventions to the system which can change the patterns of interconnecting vibrations and so bring about change in understanding, felt experience and behaviour.

Petruska Clarkson reflected this sense of a more literal energetic connection between each member of a new group in her teaching. As the group develops, a group organism/entity forms as the individuals connect with each other (personal communication, J. Scott, 2018). This energetic connection can also be experienced in, for example, a Quaker Meeting:

> As a meeting 'gathers'… there gradually develops a feeling of belonging to a group who are together seeking a sense of the Presence. The 'I' in us begins to feel like 'we' … we suddenly feel a sense of unity, a sense of togetherness with one another and with something outside ourselves." (Bodine, 1980)

*Treatment vs Paradoxical Theory of Change:* The idea of 'treatment' is challenging to a Gestalt therapist as it appears to be directly contrary to the 'paradoxical theory of change' (Beisser, 1970) which proposes that we change by becoming fully who we are, not by trying to be different. However, the interventions offered in EP are not directed at changing a person but rather at clearing obstacles which stand in the way of becoming more fully one self.

The practice of identifying and clearing obstacles or resistances to change, known as 'psycho-energetic reversals', originated with Roger Callahan. He views this as his most important contribution to psychological healing. Such reversals are motivations against healing and change which are out of awareness and relate to ambivalence about change, such as not feeling it is safe, fearing a loss of identity, not deserving healing, being too angry to heal, or not believing that change is possible.

Clearing a reversal often involves tapping on the side of the hand (on the small intestine meridian) while focused on a problematic issue and making a statement which has the structure 'even though I have (this problem) I completely accept myself'. The intention is to clear a disturbance in the energy system that prevents the person from moving forward towards their own conscious desire for change. In Gestalt terms this could be seen as bringing fixed gestalts and interruptions to contact into awareness and so fits well with our guiding vision that 'the healing task is to facilitate the removal of impediments, hindrances and obstacles to the self-actualisation process' (Clarkson, 1989, p. 41).

Gestalt therapists have a healthy respect for resistances, believing that it is better to explore or understand the resistance than to fight it, and so may be suspicious of the idea of 'clearing reversals'. However, the process of correcting the reversal can often develop into an exploration of its purpose and lead to a respect for its function. There is also a connection here with the Gestalt concept of the impasse – 'the point at which the "growthful" forces are in conflict with the "resisting" or blocking forces within the individual-environment field' (Mackewn, 1997, p. 171). A typical treatment phrase that could be co-created by therapist and client might be 'even though I am far too angry to be over this, I fully and deeply love, honour and respect myself, all parts of myself, including my entirely legitimate anger, and I ask for help in releasing myself from the bind of my anger'.

Both therapies reject a dualistic understanding of mind–body. Gestalt pays close attention to moment-by-moment changes in felt sensation while focused on an issue, and the therapist also focuses on changes in the client's body and will often draw attention to movements or postures which are held out of awareness as a way of discovering more about the client's embodied experience of what is being said. EP also draws on the client's embodied experience and invites the client to name what is felt in the body before, during and after EP interventions. Muscle (or Energy) testing is also a powerful demonstration of the body's ability to know fully what is held energetically in the embodied self.

Gestalt therapy encourages client and therapist to engage in creative experiments that help to develop the client's range of available choices. It may, therefore, be relatively easy for Gestalt therapists to include the more active and directive interventions of EP in their practices. However, Gestalt experiments grow out of the dialogue and are co-created in the moment. EP interventions can be based on existing protocols when one is first learning, but as practitioners develop competence and grace, interventions become co-created and develop out of the dialogue with the client.

*Does the past matter?* Gestalt therapy is more interested in the 'here and now' than in the historical roots of present suffering and aims to develop greater awareness, flexibility and responsiveness to the present situation. Developing awareness in the present may include becoming more aware of past factors that continue to affect the present, but this is not seen as being particularly important. In EP there is often a more deliberate search for the earliest origins of present difficulties. This accords with understandings of time from quantum physics in which past, present and future all exist simultaneously (Einstein, 1916) and we can still be impacted energetically in the present by past events – the field that we inhabit is not confined to what we perceive as present time. Einstein himself wrote to the sister of a friend who had died, 'Michele has left this strange world a little before me. This means nothing. People like us who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is nothing more than a persistent stubborn illusion' (Rovelli, 2014, p. 58).

In 2000 I attended a Gestalt workshop on 'Body Mind United' in the Jerusalem Forest. I had the opportunity there to be the demonstration subject for a family constellation (Hellinger, 1998) led by Richard Wallstein. During this exercise the person who represented my mother expressed a need for support. Group member after group member was put to stand behind her until there was no one left, and still she felt unsupported. Until that moment I had never consciously considered my mother's fragility and need for support. I had heard stories (lightly told) of her experience and that of her family during the Second World War, but had failed to recognise the significance of this for the present, and my introjected need to care for and support my mother was well out of awareness. Even after this experience of the constellation, I do not recall any further exploration of the impact on me of my mother's trauma in my personal Gestalt therapy. But since I have been using EP I have come to pay more attention to my mother's experience of being separated from her parents as a teenager by the war. They and her younger siblings were in concentration camps in the Netherland East Indies while she was living with cousins in occupied Holland. Her elder brother was in Dachau. My grandmother was tortured by the Kempetai. My parents met in Japan immediately after the war and shortly after I was born my father was away, fighting in the Korean War.

Energy Psychotherapy has allowed me not only to understand but also to release the energetic traces of these earlier family experiences. Gestalt therapists, rightly, discourage the constant retelling of past hurts and trauma which can simply serve to justify and reinforce fixed gestalts and negative patterns of behaviour. But there is something very different going on when the trauma that is being named is not just rehearsed, but is being released at an energetic level. Although it is sometimes useful to focus on the details of a particular traumatic experience, very often this is not needed and we can release energy around the trauma by bringing it into the thought field with the lightest of allusions. This greatly reduces the risk of triggering the client into unbearable pain and provides protection from 'the eruption or menace of shame' (Wheeler, 1995, p. 80).

Energetic origins from the past often emerge as associations that arise when working with a current issue, but they can also be deliberately sought out using muscle testing (MT). MT offers the possibility of checking hunches about energetic origins that go back beyond our conscious knowledge, such as our experiences *in utero* or through the traumatic events of previous generations in our ancestral history. MT may not establish objective 'truth'. However, it seems to confirm a deep emotional truth and we find that working with what emerges from such testing often leads to noticeable positive shifts. In the case example below, the client is consciously aware of her mother's rejection and anger. As we talk together about the roots of this we start to explore what she knows and can deduce about her mother's situation and emotional state at the time of Alice's birth. This leads us to conjecture that her mother's anger was there from the beginning and that Alice may have been an unwelcome guest in the womb. We muscle test the statement 'I experienced my mother's anger in her womb'. Her arm is firm and there is a sense that this statement resonates with her core.

## Clinical example

Alice, who has two young children, was depressed and angry and was troubled by lack of connection to her family. She had an alcoholic father who died when she was six, and an emotionally removed mother who had an abusive relationship with another man for a few years before Alice reached her teens. She told me that she found it difficult to express emotion, but

had recently got in touch with intense anger during a meditation class.

In our first session, we recognised her anger with her mother as, what would be called in Gestalt terms, an emerging 'figure' of interest. I offered a phrase to help sharpen this figure, 'all my anger and rage that my mum does not want to know me', and led her into an experiment which involved her moving her hands down through her chakras (or energy centres) while she repeated this phrase at each point. As she did this, she soon moved from numbness into direct emotional contact with earlier memories in the 'now, here' and she 'felt' her mother's hand hit her and, to her own surprise, began to cry.

If I had been working with Alice in a purely Gestalt way, I could have stayed with the emerging figure of her experience of anger with her mother by encouraging her to pay close attention to her embodied sense of herself as she repeated the words 'my mother does not want to know me'. We might have experimented with what happened in her body as she named her anger and imagined expressing that anger to her mother with increasing volume and clarity. This intervention might also have increased emotional contact with her experience and allowed us to work through it and release it and so 'complete the unfinished situation' by releasing the 'considerable energy continually expended to keep it out of use in every present' (Perls et al., 1951/1972, p. 294).

Further conversation and muscle testing in the next session led us to focus on her experience *in utero* with the phrase 'all the ways I experienced my mother's anger in her womb'. Following through on what emerged as she stayed with this phrase and allowed it to resonate in her body, she connected with a contrasting vision of herself as a small baby safely held, which felt good. I became aware of a warmth in my chest, around the heart chakra.

At the next session, we co-created a positive *intention* for the rest of the therapy which was 'I feel joyfully connected to my family'. Intention is here meant as a positive hope and expectation of the possibility of healing and transformation. With this understanding, we checked for and treated any energetic reversals that might stand in the way of fulfilling that intention. In Alice's case we cleared three objections: 'It is not safe for me to fulfil this intention'; 'I don't deserve to do so'; and 'I won't be me if I do so'; and then over the following sessions we identified and worked with several other traumatic events in her own life and in her family history so as to complete this 'unfinished business' and release the energy holding her back from feeling joyfully connected to her family.

These events included an experience of being physically torn apart while giving birth to her first daughter, a trauma in her own mother's life when she gave up an illegitimate child for adoption, the moment of hearing of her father's death, the suicide of her father's brother, and an early and nebulous memory of being sexually abused when very little. We named and released her shock and fear and anger and rage about this early trauma and cleared an associated negative belief, 'I am damaged'. As she spoke this phrase on each chakra point she found herself spontaneously thinking 'I am complete'.

After fifteen sessions Alice was able to say 'For the first time I am able to feel alive and present in my body and where there was anger and depression is now a gentle peace and blossoming spirituality. Also, as I have improved I have seen this reflected in my children's behaviour as they have become happier and more relaxed.' Two years later she contacted me to ask for advice in training as a therapist and told me that the underlying shift she had experienced in the therapy had been maintained through the normal ups and downs of life.

## In conclusion

The Energy Psychotherapy Network understands Energy Psychotherapy to be an integration of EP techniques into our existing psychotherapeutic modalities. I find Gestalt, with its basis in the phenomenological field model and its guiding vision of 'the healthy self-regulating essence of the person' (Clarkson, 1989, p. 41), to be a particularly compatible model for this integration.

The more literal understanding of the energetic field, and the lively and embodied way in which past events arise through these EP interventions, has led me to a much deeper sense of 'I-Thou' in the therapeutic relationship. The relationship, which is less figural in EP than in contemporary Gestalt, paradoxically grows while client and therapist are together focused on exploring and releasing energetic obstacles to change, arising from both past and present. 'And [EP] is fully in the spirit of Gestalt therapy as originally understood. Fritz would have wanted to go immediately to investigate this' (personal communication, M. Parlett, 2018).

## Acknowledgements

A shorter version of this article was published as part of a collection of essays under the title *Expressions of Energy Psychotherapy*, edited by James Barrett (2018).

I am grateful for encouragement and helpful suggestions from fellow Gestaltists Malcolm Parlett, Jane Riordan, and Janice Scott, and for permission from the client named here as Alice to use her material.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.energypsychotherapyworks.co.uk> (Accessed 28 June 2018).
2. See < https://www.energypsych.org/general/custom.asp?page=Research_Landing> (Accessed 28 June 2018).
3. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekLCV-A3Aks> (Accessed 30 June 2018).
4. Jensen uses the technical term 'manual response testing' (MRT) for what is more commonly known as muscle testing (MT).

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