Killing me softly

Emotional trauma embodied as physical pain can prove resistant to talk therapy. **Viv Fogel** invites a therapist to share how her experience of emotional freedom technique helped to shift a lifetime of physical pain

My main focus here is not to explain in detail how emotional freedom technique (EFT) works and can be used. This has been done well by others.[1,2,3] My aim is to demonstrate how EFT triggered a profound shift in consciousness around a life-destroying belief and released an emotional pain so deep that it had physically manifested itself for years.

Joanne came on an EFT training course that I run for psychotherapists and counsellors. I had worked with her before, in my role as training supervisor at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust, but I knew nothing about her personal history. Although Joanne had explored her childhood trauma in personal therapy, sometimes trauma is somatised and becomes so embedded that it cannot be released through talking therapy alone.[4]

EFT is a technique that uses meridian tapping, or acupoint stimulation, combined with affirmations, to free the client of emotional and energetic disruption in the body. Research has shown it to be effective in the treatment of trauma and psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), phobias, and addictions, as well as with some physical symptoms.[5] EFT is one of many powerful energy psychology techniques. Having researched and experienced a few of them, I return to meridian tapping because of its simplicity and efficacy. EFT is not as complex or protocol-heavy as some of the other psycho-energy techniques and it can be a valuable self-regulation and self-soothing tool. It is one that clients can also learn to practise for themselves. Imagery and Gestalt work can be brought in and 'tapping' can be introduced when dialoguing with or as a sub-personality.

The EFT recipient becomes aware, sometimes during the session, sometimes later, of a deep and inexplicable intelligence that resides within the body-energy system, and how reflective of past, often hidden, emotions it is. When energy work unfolds, something 'other' is present and co-operating. As in the transpersonal therapies, this is often 'felt in the field', in the sacred container or 'temenos' of the room.[6] Research is beginning to show how energy psychology impacts on the recipient in terms of feeling more connected to body, mind and soul. EFT builds on the life-force[7] or shakti[8] – that spark of self or soul – and strengthens self-acceptance. It starts with where you are, and if you cannot accept, let alone love yourself, then you can begin with affirming: 'I am as I am. I'm doing the best I can. I forgive myself and I have compassion for myself. I choose what I choose and this is OK. I can see the possibility of accepting myself – when I'm ready – step-by-step.' Gently affirming and forgiving where you are right now, and how you choose to hold onto or protect yourself, is the first step towards healing and letting go.

I have chosen to offer this user-friendly psycho-energetic tool to practising psychotherapists and counsellors so that they can use it as an adjunct to their clinical work. I do not see EFT as 'becoming' or replacing the therapy, but as an agent for healing and change when needed. Nor does it replace the relational aspect of the therapeutic dyad, or rid it of the transferences – if transference is what is needed. What follows is Joanne's account of her experience in a demonstration session.

Emotional freedom technique (EFT) uses meridian tapping combined with affirmations to free the client of emotional and energetic disruption in the body

Joanne's story

The trauma held in my body has been resistant to talk therapy. Over 10 years ago, during a Psychosynthesis and the Body training, I began to realise how much physical pain I was holding and how I had developed the ability to dissociate from the pain by staying disconnected from my body. Not only was I in denial of physical pain, but also physical illness. Since my late teens I have suffered from thyroid problems and high levels of autoimmune antibodies. Following surgery, only 25 per cent of my thyroid gland remained but it still produced too much thyroxine and I was in denial and resisted the recommended radioactive iodine treatment. An unexpected consequence of my journey of

personal development that reconnected me to my body was an increase in physical pain, particularly lower back pain, which became excruciating and disabling. I was forced to admit that my body was not bomb proof, but sick.

Obediently, but reluctantly, I attended hospital for the radioactive iodine treatment. The experience was profoundly disturbing. I sat alone in a high security booth, watched through glass by staff in protective clothing. I followed instructions to break the seal on the lead cylinder and dilute the black liquid before drinking it and resealing the cylinder. I then spent two weeks in isolation in my home, unable to even share a bathroom with my family. I will never forget the look of fear in my son's face as he backed away from me to a 'safe distance'. I did not want 'them' to kill off part of my body but I felt I had no choice. Within a few weeks of the treatment I could hardly walk. Every movement was painful and an effort. Over the next three years, although I improved slowly, I could not regain my former mobility and relatively pain-free state.

Viv suggested doing some EFT on me, if I was willing, as a demonstration for the group on how to work with physical pain. I agreed. It is difficult to be sure if the previous therapy of various kinds served to lay the foundations for the deep EFT work with Viv that took place, or whether EFT offers something different. I am aware that there was a particular alchemy of skill, expertise, attunement, trust, courage, physical contact, free association, archetypal and transpersonal material, the safety and support of the group, as well as emphasis and respect for my choice.

Commentary

Viv: We were looking at how trauma manifests itself in the body. I had a hunch Joanne would respond to deep work and having seen how much she gives out to others I felt something inside her was 'crying out' to be given attention.

Joanne: I have a tendency to downplay my pain but Viv asked me to describe my lower back pain at its worst. I described how my back seizes up and how the pain runs through my body from the lower back to my lower abdomen and how the muscles lock so that it becomes almost impossible to walk. At its worst the pain is 9 on a scale of 10. Viv began the EFT 'set-up statement', asking me to repeat after her: 'Even though I allowed them to kill off part of my body, I love and accept myself anyway.' I couldn't say that, even though I wanted to.

Viv: I sometimes use the affirmation statement provocatively, as a way of testing the client's self-worth or belief. I ask the recipient to change and shape the words with me and not to affirm anything that seems inauthentic or inaccessible. It is a process of collaborative moulding. What Joanne could manage was: 'Even though I allowed them to kill off part of my body, I want to love and accept myself.'

The recipient becomes aware of a deep intelligence that resides within the body-energy system, and how reflective of past, often hidden, emotions it is

Joanne: Viv started the tapping, asking me to repeat phrases like 'I am working on it' and 'I am doing the best I can.' This provoked so many feelings about my relationship with my body and how I had neglected it, as if I had a spare one hanging in the wardbrobe. Viv continued the tapping, repeating back my words for me: 'I allowed them to kill off part of my body. It felt like I had no choice. I didn't use my voice. I didn't speak out.' I felt a violent reaction to this.

Viv: Viscerally this felt ancient. I sensed that there was another level of killing the whole body, as well as just a part of it in the hospital, ie another layer of trauma beneath. However, I chose to use only the words Joanne had given me and with this awareness trusted that whatever it was would emerge from Joanne's unconscious if it was ready to.

Joanne: Fear ran through me, which Viv noticed. I could 'see' a picture of Joan of Arc – she spoke out and look what happened to her!

Viv: My arm started to develop what I call 'psychic goose bumps' and I knew we were tapping into archetypal energy and a past and ancient scene, one familiar particularly with women.

Joanne: I told Viv I was getting some archetypal imagery and she told the group she knew the session was going into a deeper realm of ancestral or 'past-life' work. The word that kept repeating itself in my mind was 'sisterhood'. I looked at Viv and said, 'I think this is about sisterhood.' She looked me full in the face and said, 'I know, and I am right there with you.' She could not have known how much hearing that meant to me because she did not know my story. I don't often tell my story because I protect people from it

Gently affirming and forgiving where you are right now, and how you choose to hold onto or protect yourself, is the first step towards healing and letting go

Joanne's story: the wrong one died

When I was seven years old my sister and I were left alone and she died. I was the eldest. I had the responsibility. I only know what happened because it is part of my story. I don't have any memory of it. I have only been able to retrieve fragments of memory of that time. My psyche continues to protect me from the horror. Not remembering has left me not knowing whether I stayed with my sister during her suffering or if I deserted her. I do remember wanting my mother to return. I told Viv that I was experiencing survivor guilt and confirmed that it was familiar to me. I told her about the profound sadness that was so overwhelming I couldn't stay with it. I was getting flashes and then dissociating. It is difficult to remember everything that happened from this point on in the sequence of events.

I recall feeling moments of deep sadness and how this was then replaced by a heavy weight on my chest, and emptiness. When Viv asked me to give her a measurement for my physical pain, I couldn't. I could only connect to the heavy weight and the emptiness. Viv asked me to focus on that: it was a heavy weight of responsibility, which felt familiar. I entered into this, not speaking, while Viv gave me space and kept tapping.

I remembered a time when I could move freely and how thankful and happy I was with each step I took, as though even as a small child I did not take joy of movement for granted, and knew that this was precious.[9] Viv tapped in 'joy' and 'freedom' and suggested that I might imagine seeing my small child doing this – so that she and I could rejoin with that again. Immediately I became afraid again.

I remembered that one moment I had the joy and freedom of movement and the next the heavy weight of responsibility. Viv could see my attachment to the pain. She tapped on 'my choice to hold onto the pain'... my choice. Immediately I knew that I didn't want anyone to take away this pain because it was all I had left of my sister. Those words – 'all I have left' – seemed to pull me into a deep despair. I cried and wailed.

Commentary

Viv: Joanne's wail was like a mournful keening; her back arching, her head thrown back, eyes closed. Then she collapsed forward, overcome by waves of grief and guilt. I felt the enormity of how she'd always been carrying her sister who died in her and how, over the years, her body had held onto that physical (and emotional) pain: the lower back pain, the swollen leg muscles that made it difficult to walk, the silent suffering and disablement. All this weight of pain was inextricably bound up with her sister.

Joanne: I know that Viv got out of her chair and stroked me as I rocked and cried.

Viv: My hand gently rotated her heart chakra at her centre back.[10]

Joanne: This was about my loyalty to my sister, and how it wasn't fair, and how she did not deserve to die in the way she did.

Viv: I was picking up 'How could Joanne let go of her pain and suffering in this life, when her sister had lost hers? When she was meant to be responsible?'

Joanne: All the guilt about the times I was jealous of my sister and the times I was 'naughty' came flooding back to me and I felt powerfully reconnected to the pain and suffering. I knew that I wanted to share that with my sister – because that was all I had left of her. Viv asked me to speak to my sister as though she were there in front of me, in the room with us. I did. I sensed her there and I asked her forgiveness. Somehow, something in me, or her shifted – and for the first time I felt her forgiveness.

Viv: This shift came after a period of silent inner dialogue with her sister, which I could almost 'hear' until the air grew lighter and I imagined her sister softening with compassion and forgiveness for Joanne.

Joanne: For years I wished I had died instead of my sister. I had to take two days off work after reading *Love's Executioner* because I was too upset to leave the house after reading the chapter titled 'The Wrong One Died'.[11] All those feelings were suddenly in the past. In that moment, I reconnected to my sister, and also to my sisterhood.

Viv: I could imagine both sisters smiling here. Joanne's expression softened.

Joanne: I remember Viv tapping and affirming that my sister forgave me and didn't want me to continue to suffer – and I could now choose to move with joy.

Viv: There was a sense that the two sisters were now linked in a different way. Joanne's little sister, instead of being carried as an intensely painful burden, has moved on. She's a woman now and she has become an ally. The two of them had also 'plugged into' a collective sisterhood – so they could still 'work' supportively together.

Joanne: Viv wanted to demonstrate the technique of tapping in the positive, negative and then positive again.

Viv: This is Pat Carrington's Choices Method.[3] I was mindful that I was also teaching EFT! Interestingly, after all the silences and inner work, this protocol seemed to highlight something profound.

Joanne: When Viv tapped in the old negatives I knew they were no longer true for me. My pain was no longer my only connection to my sister. I have my sister back, even if she has died, and I also feel part of a much bigger sisterhood. My physical pain feels irrelevant because I can feel joy and freedom again, and I look forward to rediscovering joy and freedom in my body.

Viv: After the session was over there was a palpable lightness in the room, a felt sense of the shift, as compassionate connection and 'sisterhood' replaced the fear: 'We are in this together. I am with you.'

Postscript from Joanne

I have just experienced my first pain-free holiday for eight years. Generally speaking, my quality of sleep has improved significantly because I am no longer woken up by physical pain. As a result my energy levels, alertness, and mood are also better. My improved energy and mobility are helping me to lose some of the extra weight I gained after the thyroid treatment. People have noticed that I look younger because the strain has lifted from my face. My relationships with several of my women friends have deepened and I now experience a sense of 'belonging to the sisterhood' for the first time. This is a new dimension to my life that has become extremely important to me.

From a professional perspective, I have noticed that I am more relaxed and present with my clients and my sensitivity to transference and countertransference is better as a result. I attribute this to being more 'in my body' rather than having to block out the pain in my body.

When I agreed to write up my experience I wanted to be honest and impartial. Therefore it is important that I also include the fact that the pain has returned occasionally, in my sleep, and I wondered if I was processing some remaining traumatic memory. On one occasion the pain, accompanied by low energy, returned for several days, due to some family dynamics that reminded me of my childhood experiences – feelings of shame, guilt and responsibility: a reminder that there is still more to process. It also serves as a reminder that I need to continue to practise self-care rather than return to the more familiar self-punishment and neglect. The important difference is that I don't resist self-care in the way I have done for 50 years. Now I don't feel guilty. I experience more lighthearted joy and delight – precious gifts that I don't take for granted. ■

Viv Fogel would like to express her gratitude to Joanne (not her real name) for so generously sharing her story.

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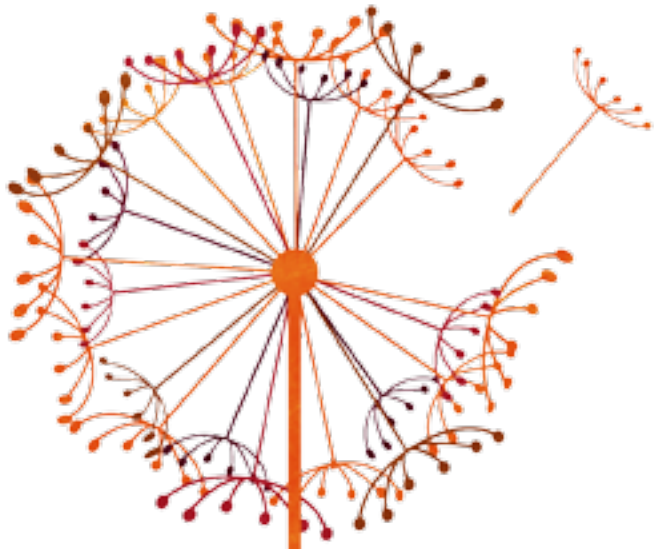

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viv Fogel is a training supervisor at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust in London and has been in private practice since 1985. She supervises alternative health practitioners and teaches psychotherapists and counsellors how to incorporate EFT into their talk-therapy practice. She's also an artist and published poet.

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