

PSYCH 101

What Is Tapping, and Can It Really Improve Mental Health?

Proponents say that manually stimulating acupressure points can ease a variety of maladies.



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It looks a little goofy.

A self-help method called “tapping,” which involves using the fingertips to perform acupressure while countering negative emotions with breathing exercises and positive affirmations, has elicited eye-rolls from some mental health professionals.

“I’m safe in my car,” a woman on TikTok says as she practices the technique, using a finger to tap the top of her head, then the side of her eyebrow and the middle of her chin. “I am my safe space.”

In the video, she explains that driving by herself is a struggle, but tapping has helped lower her anxiety and refocus her thoughts.

Anecdotes like this are easy to find on social media. Over the last 15 years or so, tapping has also popped up on wellness podcasts, TV shows and even the best-seller list.

As a result, the practice, also known as the Emotional Freedom Technique or E.F.T., has attracted a devoted following and become a big business. But many experts remain skeptical.

Where did tapping come from?

Tapping, which falls under the umbrella of energy psychology, originated from a technique called Thought Field Therapy developed by the psychologist Roger Callahan in the 1980s.

He conceived of it while working with a patient who had a severe phobia of water, which Dr. Callahan tried treating in various ways, including exposure therapy by the pool.

One day, when the patient complained that just looking at the water gave her a stomachache, Dr. Callahan told her to tap firmly under her eye, an area he knew to be associated with the “stomach meridian” in traditional Chinese medicine.

According to Dr. Callahan, after two minutes of tapping, the patient declared her stomachache had disappeared, along with her fear of the water.

Dr. Callahan developed Thought Field Therapy from there, contending that some patients required a series of acupressure points to be touched in a specific order.

Thought Field Therapy was discredited by psychology experts, in part because there isn't a way to measure energy meridians, nor any evidence that proves they exist. But in the 1990s, Gary Craig, a Stanford graduate who later became an ordained minister, rebranded the technique, creating a simplified version called E.F.T.

Proponents suggest that tapping not only relieves stress and anxiety but can also improve symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction and chronic pain, among other maladies.

Practitioners now pay hundreds of dollars to take E.F.T. courses or pursue an official certification.

Does it work?

Even though there are more than 200 studies that examine meridian tapping, this body of work is not as robust as it might sound. Research that claims to highlight the effectiveness of E.F.T. has been riddled by conflicts of interest, small sample sizes, statistical errors and a lack of rigor.

For these reasons, prominent members of the American Psychological Association have said that the push to popularize E.F.T. is based on pseudoscience.

“When you really look at the evidence, it falls apart,” said Cassandra L. Boness, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico and the lead author of a peer-reviewed commentary published in 2024 that raised concerns about the quality of E.F.T. research and questioned the effectiveness of the technique.

But that isn’t to say that E.F.T. is useless, experts said. Those who try the technique are instructed to think about or do activities they may find scary or uncomfortable — a form of exposure therapy, which is a powerful way of regulating emotions. Tapping also involves taking a moment to explore one’s thoughts, which therapists say can help people understand their behavior.

In essence, tapping is “a hodgepodge of interventions, some of which are, I’m sure, quite effective,” said David F. Tolin, the director of the Anxiety Disorders Center at the Institute of Living in Hartford, Conn. But there isn’t high-quality research to show that tapping itself is the active ingredient, he added.

What’s the harm?

Despite the lackluster evidence, some patients and therapists insist tapping truly helps.

“It doesn’t replace existing best practices for treating PTSD, depression, addictions or other serious conditions,” said David Feinstein, who offers classes and certifications in energy medicine, along with his wife. But, in his opinion, it can

make those treatments more effective.

Melissa Lester, a psychotherapist in Sandy Springs, Ga., said she found tapping could provide quick benefits, including a calmer, clearer mind. She decided to become certified in the technique because she wanted to give her clients an alternative when methods offered by other therapists, like cognitive behavioral therapy, didn't produce the desired results.

Providing an alternative treatment can indeed be useful to patients, Dr. Boness said, but she questioned whether it was ethical to do so in the absence of rigorous scientific evidence.

Her "biggest fear," she added, was that vulnerable people would turn to tapping, and then find that it doesn't work.

"It's not actually a psychological treatment," she said.

Christina Caron is a Times reporter covering mental health.

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