

Subtle energy: Psychology's missing link

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Early in the video, a woman walks out onto a balcony and toward the railing, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. When she gets within five feet, it is as if she has hit an invisible wall. She says, “I can’t go any further,” and it appears as if she is unable to make her foot complete the next step. The camera focuses on her face. She is shaking, sweating, and holding back tears. She backs away and with obvious relief returns to the room.

There she is shown how to tap a series of points on the surface of her skin, which correspond with the “energy points” used in acupuncture, while visualizing scenes related to heights or making statements related to her phobia. Within thirty minutes of this “treatment,” you see her return to the balcony, walk straight to the railing, place her hands on it, lean over, and with some mixture of amazement, pride, and joy, announce “It’s gone.” Her decades-long fear of heights has left, and, on follow-up, has not returned. The video is part of a training program for therapists learning “energy psychology” or “energy-based psychotherapy” or, simply, “energy therapy.”

Literally thousands of cases with dramatic results such as this, reported by practitioners of the energy therapies - variously known as TFT (Thought-Field Therapy), EFT (Emotional-Freedom Techniques), BSFF (Be Set Free Fast), and other acronyms - have largely been ignored by the psychotherapy establishment. The paradigm gap is too large to bridge easily. The credibility gap, where strange-looking physical procedures that involve no insight rapidly “cure” long-standing psychological problems that have resisted other therapeutic interventions, is even larger. “Show us the scientific evidence” has been the official, and appropriate, reply. Systematic empirical support for these claims is beginning to appear. (See appendix A, “Early Evidence.”)

The ‘Energy’ of Energy Psychology

Few concepts in the healing arts have been used more loosely than *energy*. While energy takes many forms, it is commonly defined as *a force that produces a physical change* (“the capacity of a physical system to do work”). Locomotives were propelled with the *thermal* energy released by burning coal. A bowling ball scatters the pins with the *kinetic* energy it delivers by virtue of its motion. *Chemical* energy, released as different substances react with one another, can be harnessed in the batteries that play a Walkman or start a car. *Nuclear* energy, until it is released to power a submarine or devastate a city, holds together the nucleus of an atom. Whereas nuclear energy originates in the core of an atom, *electrical* current involves the flow of electrons that normally orbit that core.

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. The negative polarity is outside the cell membrane; the positive polarity is inside. The human body is composed of seventy-five trillion such “batteries.” From the cells to the organs to the entire body, we are electromagnetic fields within fields within fields. Instruments for identifying and measuring our electrical and electromagnetic energies, from the voltmeter to the MRI, have long existed and are continually being refined.

The electromagnetic field produced by the heart can be detected anywhere on the surface of the body using an electrocardiogram (ECG). This field also extends a number of feet away from the

body, radiating in all directions, as can be measured by an instrument called a SQUID-based magnetometer. Experiments emerging from a number of labs, such as the HeartMath Institute in California, the Human Energy Systems Laboratory at the University of Arizona, and William Tiller's Department of Materials Science and Engineering at Stanford University, have demonstrated the electromagnetic effects of one person on another. For instance, when two people are within conversational distance, fluctuations in the heart signal of one correspond with fluctuations in the brain waves of the other.¹ Suppose you and a colleague are working on a project. Your colleague uses a gesture that is similar to a gesture that someone you loved long ago often used. Even though you do not consciously connect the gesture with your old love, the electrical signals in your heart fluctuate each time the gesture is used. Your colleague's brainwaves (as would be measured by an electroencephalogram) fluctuate in a close resonance with the fluctuations in the electrical energy generated by your heart. While your colleague may or may not consciously register an interpersonal shift, these fluctuations influence the mental state that both you and your colleague are now bringing into the collaboration.

Far more than just electrical fluctuations, your heart's energies carry information that influences your mood, personality, and preferences. As biochemist Candace Pert has demonstrated and reported in her book, Molecules of Emotion, the body's "brain" is not located in the brain alone. Cells throughout the body receive and transmit informational molecules that impact mental states. The degree to which organs besides the brain carry psychologically relevant information is vividly evidenced in transplant patients. Documented reports on dozens of people who have received a donor heart have revealed unanticipated shifts in the recipient toward tastes and behavioral patterns that were characteristic of the donor.²

Subtle Energies

The energies that are of concern in energy psychology encompass the familiar electromagnetic spectrum as well as more "subtle" energies that cannot be detected using standard measuring devices, but nonetheless appear to carry information. *Ch'i*, the basis of acupuncture, is among the most well-known examples, although most cultures have a concept to describe energies or fields that cannot be experienced directly through the senses, yet which are believed to influence people's lives, such as *ki* (in Japan), *prana* (in India and Tibet), *baraka* (in Sufism), *waken* (in the Lakota Sioux tradition), *megbe* (in the Ituri pygmy culture of the northeastern Congo forests), and *yesod* (in Jewish Kabbalistic tradition).

Subtle energy is energy that we do not know how to detect directly but which, like gravity, we know by its effects. Most basic is the "life force." When it is there, you are alive; when it is not there, even if your cells are still alive, you are dead. While an intuitively easy notion, neither the life force nor other forms of subtle energy have been directly registered by our most sensitive physical instruments. Yet a concept such as subtle energy is necessary to account for energies that are known for their effects, even though we do not know how to detect them directly.

Particularly puzzling to people educated in conventional science are data that appear to confirm the distance-healing effects of mind or consciousness on the physical world, including human, animal, and plant bodies. Empirically documented cases are accumulating. The power of prayer, from making wheat grow faster to decreasing the risk of complications in cardiac patients, is well-established,³ as is the physical impact of focused visualization on people, animals, plants, organs, blood, and cells.⁴ Experiments at the School of Engineering at Princeton University, frequently replicated, show that readings of a *random*-event generator (an electronic device that uses a random

physical process such as radioactive decay to generate random events or random numbers) reveals *patterns* when placed in the vicinity of groups of people whose attention is focused (as when watching a performance) that are not found in the presence of a group whose attention is scattered, or when no people are present at all.⁵

Not only are scientists faced with the difficulty of explaining the relationship between subtle and electromagnetic forms of energy, they are doubly perplexed by evidence that seems to show consciousness -- whose essence is subjectivity — can directly affect objective, physical systems. Neither science nor philosophy can even begin to explain how it is possible that mind, consciousness, or spirit could influence matter or energy (subtle or electromagnetic). Nevertheless, the evidence is there, demanding explanation.

Images of water crystals taken by Japanese researcher Masaru Emoto⁶ on the effects of various variables are suggestive. The variables included the source of the water (crystals derived from a spring in Saijo, Japan, do not resemble crystals taken from a polluted section of the Yodo River in Japan), the effects of music (crystals derived from water that was exposed to Bach do not resemble crystals from water that was exposed to heavy-metal music), and exposure to different emotions (appreciation seems to lead to beautiful symmetrical crystals, hatred to disfigured patterns). Although these findings have not been replicated so far, if subsequent research does show the procedures to be sound and the findings to be reliable, Emoto's images would appear to constitute a vivid demonstration of the impact of thought on matter. Given that the human body is more than seventy percent water, these demonstrations have already caused many people to think twice about what they think.

What possible mechanism could account for these dramatic effects of mental activity? An explanation favored among practitioners of energy psychology is that subtle energies or energy fields, influenced by the mind, operate in concert with the firing of the neurons. Mental activities such as prayer and focused intention, along with the corresponding brain activity, produce or influence energy fields that are capable of impacting physical events, such as the crystal structure of water or the output of random-number generators. The influence works in both directions. The body's subtle-energy system—which is influenced not only by thoughts, attention, and current activity, but also by interpersonal, health, and environmental factors—impacts subsequent thoughts and corresponding brain activity.

To think clearly about these relationships, it must be emphasized that the subtle-energy hypothesis does not address the mind-body problem. It does not inform us about the *nature* of subjective experience, nor does it tell us *how* the mind influences the body or its energies. Consciousness is not another form of subtle energy. As philosopher Christian de Quincey⁷ succinctly clarifies, “energy flows, consciousness knows.” Consciousness, rather than itself being a form of energy, is what feels and knows energy. Energy, even subtle energy, is on the body side of the mind-body enigma. Subtle energy, however, may be the dimension of the physical world that is most directly involved in the complementarity between mental activity and physical events, between subjective experience and neurological processes. From this vantage point, subtle energies could be a strong ally or a potential adversary for the psychotherapist. Increased attention to the presumed effects of subtle energy is, in fact, leading to new models within the healing arts.

These “new” models echo, however, the insights of healers, seers, mystics, and spiritual adepts throughout the ages. The notion that the physical body is coupled with an energy field, a subtle body, or energy body is not new; what is new is that these energies are being studied scientifically.⁸

In energy-based psychotherapy, dysfunctional patterns of thought and behavior are understood as being coded or carried in the client's energy field. They are treated in part by shifting the electromagnetic and other, more subtle, energies that are maintaining them. As with Chinese medicine, to which some of its roots trace, the theoretical core of energy psychology is simple: *Whatever the presenting problem, it has a counterpart in the client's energy system, and can be treated at that level.*

The Field of Energy Psychology

Energy psychology, as such, is a relatively new discipline. The first national professional meeting in the United States was held only in 1999. As with psychoactive medication, insight appears to play little role in the changes purportedly catalyzed by energy-based interventions into thought patterns, habitual behaviors, and emotions such as panic, shame, and anger (although new understanding often *follows* these changes). Where psychopharmacology is based on the *chemical* correlates of psychological states (for example, endorphins, epinephrine, serotonin), energy psychology is based on the hypothesized subtle *energetic* correlates of psychological states. With both medication and energy interventions, electromagnetic energies in the nervous system are measurably altered, and these electromagnetic changes appear to impact dysfunctional emotional states as well as the cerebral organization that maintains psychological problems.

The stimulation of specific points on the body by tapping or other means causes skin receptors to send signals to the brain. In energy-based psychotherapy, this stimulation is paired with having the client mentally engage a troubling feeling, thought, or image. When a person thinks about a troubling situation, brain-imaging techniques reveal that signals are sent to various regions of the brain. Many emotional problems, for instance, involve an over stimulation of the amygdala and other areas of the limbic system. The signals sent to the brain by stimulating energy points on the skin, and the signals generated in the brain by engaging a mental problem, appear to interact in a manner that reduces psychological symptoms.

The underlying principle is familiar in systematic desensitization, which has been one of the most effective clinical methods for treating anxiety since the 1950s. In systematic desensitization, a thought or image that evokes ungrounded fear or anxiety is paired with a relaxed state in the muscular system until the unwanted response to the stimulus is progressively neutralized. With energy interventions, an undesired response to a thought or image is paired with an intervention designed to neutralize a disturbance in the body's energy system. The disturbance in the body's energies is believed to precede the emotional disturbance. When the energy disturbance is neutralized in the presence of the triggering stimulus, the stimulus becomes less potent for activating the emotional disturbance. Repetition of the energy intervention while mentally engaging the triggering thought or image progressively reconditions the emotional response.

Psychology's Missing Link

A recent mini-revolution within psychology has involved the emphatic recognition that positive thinking and "learned optimism" can be self-fulfilling. *Positive psychology*, as the trend is called (www.positivepsychology.org), can point to solid evidence showing that people who hold a positive attitude are more effective in the world, attain greater success, make more adaptive choices, stay healthier, and heal more quickly than people who are more negative in their outlook. Therapies that focus primarily on the problems and negative dimensions of a person's life may be emphasizing the wrong part of the story. A positive orientation leads to positive outcomes.

While psychology cannot lay exclusive claim to this eternal principle, it can help people to learn how to acquire attitudes that have positive repercussions in their lives. Insight, will, and intention—the commonsense approaches—are often not enough to change deep attitudes. Energy interventions, combined with methods such as visualization and affirmation, provides one of the most powerful ways of initiating such shifts.

If a person visualizes him/herself attaining a well-considered goal, and disturbances instantly occur in his/her kidney and stomach meridians, his/her focus and effectiveness will be compromised. If a technique is applied that remedies the energy disturbances, he/she can move toward the goal without conflict in the energies that influence his/her perceptions and motivation. Aligning the person’s subtle energies with positive intentions is a powerful intervention.

Subtle energy may long remain an elusive concept, but if you are told that a positive person carries an energy that enriches others, or a negative person carries an energy that is self-defeating, you intuitively know what is meant, even if you cannot precisely define or point to these energies. Energy psychology adds to the clinician’s repertoire of techniques for identifying the energies that are involved with psychological problems or goals, and for influencing them to support desired outcomes. Energy interventions do not take the place of will and insight or visualization and affirmations; they simply enter from a different angle, and have strengths that purely psychological interventions do not have.

In that sense, energy psychology provides a missing link. While we may never be able to explain subjective experience adequately in physical terms such as neurochemistry or subtle energy, an understanding of the role of subtle energy is still vital for the practice of psychology. Subtle energy is a probable link, for instance, between stimulating an acupuncture point and eliminating an unwanted emotional pattern. A mental image or other subjective experience that led to a particular emotional response in the body before the treatment doesn’t lead to that emotional response in the body after the treatment.

Physical intervention → activating subtle energies → “rewiring” emotional response to mental image

Can these observed treatment-effects be explained in terms of neurophysiological mechanisms alone? Is it as simple as:

Physical intervention → activating physiological processes → “rewiring” emotional response to mental image

Some would say, “Of course, if the clinical reports prove reliable, it will all be explained in terms of neurophysiological mechanisms.”

But those more attuned to subtle energies would object, saying: “Yes, neurophysiological correlates will be able to be identified, but if we reduce our explanations to neurophysiological processes alone, we will never fully understand the holographic nature of psychological organization, the telepathic exchange of information, the transfer of an organ donor’s personality trait to the organ recipient, or the rapid transformation of long-established patterns after a brief tapping session, not to

mention phenomena such as the effect of mental activity on nonlocal physical events, as seen in prayer and distance healing. Some sort of energy field, perhaps with attributes we can barely imagine, such as a macro-level version of quantum nonlocality or unfamiliar space-time relationships, has got to be involved.

While the nature of subtle energies is still shrouded in mystery, enough is known to suggest that they influence physical health and can be harnessed to help people overcome mental problems and increase mental capacities. Subtle energies may also prove to be a link between life in a physical body and nature's archetypal or spiritual realms. A whole universe of subtle energies may, in fact, be waiting to be explored, and skillfully working with such energies is already showing great promise for empowering people to influence their own feelings, thoughts, and behavior in desired ways.

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NOTES

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Appendix A: EARLY EVIDENCE

THE PROGRESS of some 31,400 patients receiving energy-therapy treatments over a fourteen-year period at eleven allied treatment centers in Argentina and Uruguay has been carefully tracked in an ambitious research program being conducted by Joaquín Andrade, MD. While it must be emphasized that the findings are still considered preliminary and tentative—and even the program’s more formal investigations were conceived of as pilot studies—this is still the strongest body of empirical validation to date for the methods used within energy psychology. (For a summary of existing research, see www.EnergyPsychResearch.org.)

Records of the intake evaluation (the most prevalent diagnosis was anxiety disorder), procedures used, and clinical outcomes were all maintained, and 29,000 of the patients were followed at one month, three months, six months, and twelve months after treatment. The clinical success rates, based on the subjective assessment of independent raters, exceeded what would be expected from the established treatment-of-choice for anxiety disorders—the coordinated use of cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) and medication.

Beyond this large-scale clinical trial (which had no control group), double-blind, randomized pilot studies that did use control groups were also conducted. One of these compared approximately 2,500 patients receiving energy-therapy treatment with 2,500 receiving CBT and medication. The energy therapy was superior to the CBT/medication protocol in the proportion of patients showing some improvement (90% vs. 63%) and the proportion of patients showing complete remission of symptoms (76% vs. 51%). In another pilot study by the same team, the length of treatment was significantly shorter with energy therapy than with CBT (mean = 3 sessions vs. mean = 15 sessions).

The South American team also found that the superior responses attained with the energy treatments compared with the CBT/medication treatments were, in a sample of patients, corroborated by electrical and biochemical measures. Brain mapping revealed that subjects whose acupuncture points were stimulated tended to be distinguished by a general pattern of wave normalization throughout the brain which, interestingly, not only persisted at twelve-month follow-up, but became more pronounced. An associated pattern was found in neurotransmitter profiles. With generalized anxiety disorder, for example, acupuncture-point stimulation was followed by norepinephrine levels going down to normal reference values and low serotonin going up. Parallel electrical and biochemical patterns were not found in the CBT/medication group. While these reports are as preliminary as they are provocative, if subsequent research supports them, key mechanisms explaining the surprising effectiveness of acupuncture-based treatment approaches will have been identified. —DF

Appendix B RAPID RELIEF FROM A SNAKE PHOBIA

I am teaching a six-day residential workshop with forty participants at a game reserve that conference organizers have rented near Pretoria, South Africa. Many in this racially mixed group are leaders in their communities within South Africa or Namibia. They have come to learn about the deep personal myths—the core beliefs and motivational schemes—that shape a person’s life. We

will also be examining the shifting cultural myths that surround them, and that provide the context for their own unfolding personal mythologies.⁹

The first evening, one of the participants tells the group that she is so afraid of snakes that she is terrified of walking from the conference room to her cabin, about one hundred feet away, through lighted though rustic pathways. Sensing that she could rapidly be helped with this phobia, I arrange, with her tense but trusting permission, for a snake to be brought into the class the next day. It turns out that she cannot be in the room with it without dissociating. In her words, “I can look at it [from twenty feet], but I left my body two minutes ago.” Within less than half an hour, using methods described in this article, she walks up to the snake and touches it, haltingly but triumphantly. Gazing at it, she extols its beauty, and reports that she is fully present in her body. This proves to be a most satisfactory way of introducing the participants to the “energy” component of the workshop. Three days later, the group is driven out into the bush and returns on foot, about a sixty-minute nature walk. When they are back, another class member asks the woman if her fear of snakes made the walk difficult. A surprised look comes over her face. She realizes, “I never even thought about it.” Her lifelong fear had evaporated. —DF