

Local therapist taps into promising help for combat-linked stress

By Carol Ann Alaimo

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Can ancient Chinese healing rites help Iraq war veterans cope with combat trauma?

A Tucson-area therapist believes they can, and is offering free treatments for local Iraq vets to test an approach that involves tapping on the acupuncture points used in Chinese medicine.

The Emotional Freedom Technique, or EFT, relatively little known and not widely embraced in traditional therapy circles, has been used to successfully treat crime victims, disaster responders and witnesses to the World Trade Center attacks, according to recent articles in psychology and traumatology journals.

It also is being used to treat troops for combat stress at a handful of veterans' hospitals around the country, though not in Tucson.

Mary Stafford of Oro Valley is one of a dozen or so therapists nationwide taking part in a clinical trial of the method to assess its effectiveness on returning veterans.

Stafford, who has used the technique for a decade, is approved by the National Board for Certified Counselors to teach it to other therapists.

"This is a counselor's dream because of how quickly it works and how much you can help people," Stafford said.

She and other practitioners say the technique takes the sting out of trauma memories, in some cases after years of traditional therapy could not.

Stafford started using the method in 1996 when she worked as a crisis counselor at a state welfare office in Tucson.

At the time, hundreds of people were being forced off government benefits during welfare reform. The office was packed daily with people in various stages of panic, she recalled.

Some were phobic about taking employment tests. Some had self-esteem issues or talked of suicide. Crisis counselors had just one hour to spend with each client before moving on to the next.

"I used to go home at night and worry about these clients," Stafford said. "Nothing I knew how to do could help them quickly enough to make a difference."

After hearing about the technique and taking a training class, Stafford began teaching welfare clients how to calm themselves by focusing on their fears while tapping on their hands, faces and other acupuncture points. Many found near-immediate relief, she said.

"I was overwhelmed by how much more effective it is than the standard counseling-talking approaches," Stafford said. Since then, she said, she has used the technique to treat dozens of clients with various types of trauma.

Stafford and many other advocates believe the method works by rebalancing psychic energy in the ancient "energy meridians" identified in acupuncture — a premise that tends to raise eyebrows in the Western psychology world.

Local recruits

Therapist Mary Stafford of Oro Valley is seeking up to 20 Iraq veterans to take part in the Multi-City Iraq PTSD Program, a clinical trial to test the effectiveness of the Emotional Freedom Technique. Veterans will receive six free treatments and follow-up assessments after three and six months. Stafford can be reached at 575-1497 or by e-mail at mstafford@mindbodytherapy.com.

Other advocates of the method couldn't care less about the claim to ancient origins. The important thing, they said, is that it works.

Talk of Chinese meridians "doesn't matter," said Charles Figley, a psychologist and expert in disaster mental health who founded the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology in response to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The Minnesota-based humanitarian group responds to natural and human-caused disasters, providing emotional help to traumatized survivors and emergency responders.

Green Cross teams successfully used the technique on survivors of the World Trade Center attack on 9/11, he said.

"As a scientist, I am interested in the simplest explanation for this," Figley said. He said the points tapped on during sessions — around the eyes and temples, and at the top of the rib cage — are the same places people instinctively reach for to soothe themselves, for example, by rubbing their temples after a stressful day.

Some advocates think the technique works because the tapping interrupts the brain during the recall of traumatic events, dampening the emotional charge such memories carry.

Lynn Garland, a clinical social worker who specializes in trauma therapy at the Boston VA Health Care System — one of the few Veterans Affairs medical centers that use the technique — said she's treated 100 or so clients since 2000 with overwhelmingly positive results.

Some are veterans of the Korean or Vietnam wars who had suffered for decades and hadn't found much relief from traditional therapy, she said.

The technique stopped their flashbacks and panic symptoms almost instantly, said Garland, who predicts the method will one day be widely used.

"The veterans are surprised and thrilled with the results," Garland said. The method doesn't replace traditional therapy in severe cases, she said, but when used in conjunction, patients make rapid progress, instead of limping along for years in emotional despair.

Dr. Stephen Ezeji-Okoye, head of the VA Field Advisory Committee on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, which looks at non-traditional treatments that might benefit veterans, said the clinical trial of the Emotional Freedom Technique is a first step toward possible wider use of the method in the VA system.

If the study is well-designed and shows the technique is effective, "that's exactly the sort of thing we want to take a look at," he said.

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