

Coping with Cancer: Managing Anxiety with Body-based Methods

By Ellyn Kerr, M.Sc., science/technology communications consultant | May 30, 2014

The frightening gravity of cancer is difficult to convey. Every treatment option has undesirable, potentially distressing side effects. Medical costs can easily surpass financial resources, [compounding stress and limiting patients' treatment options](#). Realistic anxiety about death becomes a prevalent companion.

We know stress weakens the immune system, interferes with digestion, disrupts healthy cortisol (and therefore insulin) metabolism, and restricts blood flow. For cancer patients, whose bodies must fully harness every physiological mechanism available to heal and to prevent metastases, the severity of cancer stressors can open the door to adjunct psychological “disorders”, including post-traumatic stress, complex trauma, anxiety, and depression—weakening patients’ spirits when they most need emotional and physical strength.



Emotional-freedom technique (EFT)

Complementary care providers have long understood stress and trauma to be somatic (“body-based”). According to Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, trauma “has nothing whatsoever to do with cognition [but rather] your body being reset [to interpret the world as a dangerous place](#).”

To rehabilitate from trauma/high-stress states, interventions that target the body would thus seem to make sense. However, published studies conflict as to the effectiveness of somatic methods. [One review](#) of “energy psychology”, for instance, is highly critical of emotional-freedom technique (EFT), which has a person finger-tap on various acupressure points while verbalizing a progression of “de-stressing” statements. The review (not an experimental study) noted the lack of evidence for the existence of acupressure meridians, which renders them “unfalsifiable” and therefore makes EFT impossible to validate scientifically.

Despite a graduate education in biology and my love of the scientific method, as a survivor myself, I now understand that there are highly subjective emotional states in

the cancer experience that need support. I'd argue that any relief is welcomed by cancer patients, whether evidence-based or not, regardless of potential placebo effect.

In the case of EFT, [one study](#) has shown it to be more effective than talk therapy in reducing cortisol, stress, depression, and anxiety (though the study was of nonclinical subjects).

In healing through cancer, I faced distress I wouldn't wish on a worst foe. I needed a reliable, discreet way to immediately and tangibly reduce anxiety. (Cancer fears do not respect work schedules or whether one is in public.)

I'll never know whether EFT measurably lowered my cortisol levels. But the method (also called "tapping") seemed to palpably relieve anxiety each time I used it. I credit EFT with having had a cumulative effect in my healing the psychological component of cancer, however subjective and anecdotal that statement may be. (I also turned to other somatic modalities, including core energetics, acupuncture, and reflexology, which I believe also helped.)

The industry-wide costs of treating cancer in the U.S. may reach [\\$174 billion by 2020](#). I heartily welcome evidence-based studies to corroborate which interventions effectively heal the body, mind, and emotional state after cancer. All treatments demonstrated to be effectual, whether allopathic or complementary, might then be made more readily available (i.e., covered by insurance), while those that are less effective could be optional to patients. This could help an inflated health care system as well as patients' individual recoveries.

I appreciate that esteemed medical practitioners, like Dr. Sheldon Feldman, Chief of Breast Surgery at Columbia University Medical Center, have [initiated clinical assessment of complementary therapies](#) like reiki for breast cancer care. I am pleased that published studies confirm that integrative care approaches (including somatic methods like yoga therapy) [improve patient experience](#) and [reduce in-patient costs for hospitals](#).

But anecdotal observations also carry weight for me. The headmaster of an orphanage for teen genocide survivors in Rwanda claims that EFT was responsible for a [90% reduction in trauma outbreaks](#) since 2008. Given my experience, such observations are important and should encourage further consideration of complementary and somatic therapies as integral components of allopathic medical regimens. Cancer is simultaneously a biological and psychological experience, and the most effective approaches to healing must ultimately address both aspects.

Cancer survivors know the value of shared information about healing. If you are a survivor (or caregiver), have you explored body-based techniques in managing stress, depression, or trauma? Were they effective? Please share your experience below.

To read this post on RWHC Blog, [click here](#).