

**Thought Field Therapy (TFT): A Treatment Modality to Reduce Trauma-Induced Distress  
Among Adults Diagnosed with a Substance Use Disorder**

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### **Abstract**

Thought Field Therapy (TFT) is promising psychotherapy approach based on its ability to rapidly relieve human suffering. Drawing from information gathered at SpiritLife Inc., an inpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility, this research examines the effects of a TFT intervention on individuals who have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder (SUD) and were experiencing distress related to a trauma. This study found that 100% of participants experienced a reduction in distress symptoms post-intervention.

## **1. Objectives and Background of the Paper**

### **1.1. Introduction**

Two social issues that impact individuals and families across the nation are: (1) exposure to trauma and (2) substance abuse. Social workers are often working on the front lines to provide treatment that can help guide and empower these individuals to improve their quality of life.

Among various treatment options for trauma and substance abuse, Thought Field Therapy (TFT), has been gaining traction over the years. TFT is an energy-based psychotherapy that reduces physiological distress by correcting the imbalances of energy flow in the body (Good Therapy, 2022).

Across the nation, trauma is the number one cause of death for people from age 1-46 and the annual toll is approximately \$4.2 trillion (Coalition for National Trauma Research, 2020). Similarly, substance abuse is a major problem affecting approximately 21 million Americans (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2022). Studies suggest that the exposure to trauma can wreak havoc in individuals both physically and emotionally (Bray, 2006). Often, experiencing a traumatic event leads directly to substance use as a method to cope. TFT is an appealing approach because this treatment is quick, noninvasive, and economical. Moreover, it can be used in conjunction with other modalities to compliment any traditional treatment being provided. TFT is proving to be an innovative and effective psychotherapy tool that can be used to treat trauma, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, stress, and many other disorders (Connolly, 2022).

Considering the complexity of trauma and substance use disorders, using a holistic approach is important. For example, there are decades of research that has found a direct link between the exposure of a traumatic event and the development of a substance use disorder

(SUD) (Galindo, 2020). Conversely, individuals with a SUD are more likely to experience a traumatic event, leaving individuals in a perpetual cycle of co-occurrence. Traditionally, those who have trauma disorders with a co-occurring SUD have experienced poorer outcomes because previous treatment modalities have focused on one disorder at a time (Galindo, 2020). However, the more we understand the complexities of these disorders, the more we can focus our efforts to create a treatment that addresses the individual holistically, with a recovery mindset and an emphasis on building resiliency.

TFT has been found to be an effective intervention for many disorders. There has been some criticism over the years for the seemingly absurd use of the “tapping” method as it is viewed as an unconventional approach. However, despite the criticism, TFT is still an effective treatment modality evidenced by dramatically and permanently eliminating trauma-based problems for a substantial number of people (Mollon, 2007). The purpose of this research was to compare the subjective levels of distress in patients at SpiritLife, before and after they receive the TFT intervention.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

### **1.2.1 Thought Field Therapy (TFT)**

Complementary treatments, such as Thought Field Therapy (TFT), seek health for individuals by balancing mind, body and soul. As American psychologist, Roger Callahan, developed TFT in the 1980’s, he found that emotions are correlated with various diseases which are consequences of inadequate flow of the vital force that circulates through precise points in the body (Barraza-Alvarez, 2021). Based from traditional Chinese medicine, similar to acupuncture, once the vital energy system is rebalanced, then one can return to internal and external harmony, balance, and

overall health (Barraza-Alvarez, 2021). Rebalance is achieved by tapping specific points on the body, using one's fingers, in a unique sequence.

TFT has been determined to be a safe, effective, and a culturally adaptable approach for a multitude of disorders. Moreover, TFT can also be used in a variety of settings, including self-help, peer-to-peer, and counseling settings (SAMHSA, 2016). Additionally, using TFT for children exposed to trauma has been researched and shows very promising results. The dire psychological and physiological consequences of childhood trauma have been extensively reviewed and reported (Sakai, Oas, & Connolly, 2010). For example, a 2006 study in Rwanda investigated the outcomes of TFT for children survivors of genocide who had PTSD. The study findings showed the effectiveness of TFT, as the children's PTSD symptoms were significantly reduced immediately following the treatment sessions as well as at the one year follow up session (Sakai, Oas, & Connolly, 2010).

One of the first steps in helping those who have experienced traumatic events, requires managing the overwhelming feelings and symptoms of trauma. Some of the most common symptoms of trauma, similar to symptoms of a substance use disorder, include intrusive thoughts, anxiety, mood swings, nightmares, guilt or shame, feeling sad or hopeless, or loss of memory or concentration skills. TFT can end emotional and physical symptoms in a matter of moments (Bray, 2006). Another beneficial aspect of this modality is that it does not require the individual to talk about or re-live the traumatic event. Moreover, there are no apparent side effects, therefore, it will not cause harm. TFT is considered a culturally competent approach and has been translated into fourteen languages (Bray, 2006). TFT fills an important need for cultural openness and sensitivity.

TFT has gained recognition in the field of substance abuse treatment. In 2016, TFT was listed for the treatment for PTSD symptoms on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) of the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (McAninch, 2016). The treatment protocol can be used in various settings and all interventions have met NREPP's criteria for review and have been independently assessed and rated for Quality of Research and Readiness for Dissemination (McAninch, 2016).

### **1.2.2 TFT as Energy Psychology**

To further promote the efficacy of TFT, an article written by David Feinstein (2021) looked at a database of peer-reviewed journal articles that explored the sub-specialty group known as “energy psychology.” This term describes techniques such as self-hypnosis or habituation practices that reprogram the subconscious mind. The term “energy” has long been the subject of skepticism and controversy. Energy psychology is described as an umbrella term for treatment approaches that incorporate an energetic component, including a focus on the body's well-established electromagnetic activity and subtle energies described in ancient healing traditions, such as the auras, chakras, or acupuncture meridians (Feinstein, 2021). One of the most popular variations of energy psychology is TFT. This method combines the stimulation of electrochemically-sensitive points on the skin (by tapping or holding them) with either imagining the past trauma or thinking about the stressor (Feinstein, 2021). The points used in these protocols are the same points used in acupuncture. Feinstein's review found empirically supported evidence to suggest the efficacy of energy psychology to reduce symptoms associated with trauma.

The Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology (ACEP) maintains an up-to-date database for energy psychology and related topics that are listed in indexing services such as

PubMed, PsychInfo, and Medline (Feinstein, 2021). According to the website, “as of February 2022, over 70 randomized controlled trials, over 55 pre-post outcome studies, 5 meta-analysis, and 19 systematic reviews have been published in English-speaking, peer-reviewed journals” (ACEP, 2022). Energy psychology is not only evidence-based, but it is also in the top 10% of published research for psychotherapy modalities (ACEP, 2022).

### **1.3. Description of the Host Organization and the Program**

SpiritLife Inc. is an inpatient, 58 bed, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and detox center, in Penn Run, Pennsylvania, that offers short and long-term care (SpiritLife, 2021). The mission of SpiritLife is that “recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.” During the course of treatment, clients are provided psycho-education on the disease of addiction, learn relapse prevention skills and have access to evidence-based, trauma-informed care. It is the goal of the clinical staff to find a pathway of recovery that works best for each individual. Because there is not a “one size fits all” type of intervention, SpiritLife uses the strategy of exposing clients to a variety of intervention techniques, aimed at treating the whole person: mind, body and spirit. This includes the implementation of several treatment modalities consisting of Clinical Group Therapy, Adventure Track, Spirituality, Meditation, Musicology, and Trauma-Focused Therapy.

One technique that SpiritLife uses to facilitate the natural healing process is Thought Field Therapy (TFT). A specially trained clinician, Jim McAninch, CEAP, CTR, implements this technique with patients to address the co-occurrence of trauma and substance use disorder. This method helps individuals release subconscious beliefs of trauma, through energy kinesiology. The practitioner will first complete a scan of the client’s hand or use a voice activated program to

assess an individual's energy. Then, he will locate "trapped energy" within the body and use a tapping sequence to release imbalanced energy to improve a person's mental and physical health.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study is to answer the question: Is Thought Field Therapy (TFT) an effective intervention to reduce emotional distress related to experiencing trauma in clients diagnosed with a Substance Use Disorder (SUD)? This research project will assess the effectiveness of the TFT intervention, an existing program within SpiritLife Inc., by utilizing a Subjective Unit of Distress Scale (SUDS). Clients will rate their level of distress before and after the intervention. It is hypothesized that the TFT intervention will provide immediate physical and emotional relief from distress that will, in turn, promote health and overall well-being.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Research design**

This study uses a pre- and post-test design to examine the effectiveness of TFT. The study examines changes in distress level before and after one session of TFT. All participants were provided with one session of TFT. By using the Subjective Unit of Distress Scale, participants' self-reported distress level was measured before and after the session.

### **2.2. Data collection method(s)**

Data was from 32 participants of SpiritLife TFT programs from February 2022 to April 2022. Participants responded to a 11-point distress scale before the TFT session and after the TFT session.

### **2.3. Sampling technique**

Participants were drawn from a single-site inpatient drug and alcohol facility, using convenience sampling, from clients who have been admitted to SpiritLife, diagnosed with a substance use disorder and report a history of trauma.

#### **2.4. Instrumentation**

The Subjective Unit of Distress Scale (SUDS) was developed by behavioral therapist, Joseph Wolpe (1969), as an instrument to be used to measure anxiety in exposure-based therapies (Kim, Bae, & Chon Park, 2008). Further study of the validity of SUDS found a strong correlation between initial SUDS scores with the Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI) and State Anxiety Inventory (SAI) in participants (Kim, Bae, & Chon Park, 2008). This indicated that the SUDS rating is related to the patient's current level of depression and anxiety, therefore demonstrating convergent validity.

In the present study, the SUDS will be used to measure the participant's level of distress prior to the intervention and following the intervention. One of the tenants of TFT is to reduce emotional and physical distress, therefore, SUDS is considered a reliable instrument. The validity of the SUDS has been proven in previous studies (Kim, Bae, & Chon Park, 2008). The SUDS scores range from 0 to 10, with the lowest being 0 (no distress/totally relaxed) and the highest being 10 (the most anxiety/distress that one has ever felt) "(See Appendix A)". Although there are few studies to evaluate the validity of SUDS, preliminary studies show positive psychometric properties of the instrument.

#### **2.5. Data Analytic Strategies**

The objective of this research is to determine if TFT is an effective treatment modality for those suffering with symptoms of trauma. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample used

in the present study. Data was analyzed using SPSS, version 26, for descriptive statistics and paired T-Test results.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Description of the Sample

The findings of this study demonstrate the opinions of 37 clients at SpiritLife Inc., a drug and alcohol treatment program, who received the TFT intervention. In total, 17 respondents (45.9%) are male and 20 respondents (54.1%) are female. The mean (40.5%) age of respondents are 27-38. All participants have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder and reported at least one traumatic event that has caused physical or emotional symptoms of stress. After the intervention, all participants reported a decrease in symptoms of distress.

*Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics*

| <b>Descriptive Statistics</b> |    |         |         |      |                |
|-------------------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
|                               | N  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Pre-Intervention              | 37 | 8       | 10      | 9.38 | .681           |
| Post-Intervention             | 37 | 0       | 5       | 1.92 | 1.754          |
| Gender                        | 37 | 0       | 1       | .54  | .505           |
| Age                           | 37 | 0       | 3       | 1.00 | .882           |
| Valid N (listwise)            | 37 |         |         |      |                |

#### 3.2. Findings

There is a significant average difference between pre-test and post-test SUDS scores. The 37 clients who received TFT reported a significant reduction in distress post-intervention. The mean pre-test SUDS score was 9, meaning clients reported, on average, feeling extremely anxious/distressed prior to the intervention. Conversely, the mean post-test SUDS score was 2, meaning clients reported, on average, feeling alert, awake, and very little distress immediately following the intervention.

All participants reported a decrease in their level of distress. Some participants claimed that TFT provided immediate relief from suffering that they have been struggling with for years.

They reported the following:

- “I originally rated my distress at a ten. I felt trauma first when I was two years old and that has lived within me until now. There was internal conflict that I couldn’t ever get over. After my session with Jim, I felt extremely relieved and I found it very helpful.”
- “My anxiety was at a 10, I had resentment from a past relationship and ongoing issues around my parents’ divorce. After my session with Jim, I felt extremely relieved. I would recommend these sessions to others.”
- “I’d say my distress was about a 9. I felt like I had no closure from the death of my boyfriend and I’ve been angry at his mother. I also have anger at my own mother for having no relationship and feeling like she never really wanted me. After the session, I felt fairly relieved. It was definitely helpful.”

Table 2 – Paired Samples Test

|        |                    | Paired Samples Test |                |                 |   |       |        |    |                 |
|--------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|-------|--------|----|-----------------|
|        |                    | Paired Differences  |                |                 | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |       | t      | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|        |                    | Mean                | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | Lower                                     | Upper |        |    |                 |
| Pair 1 | pretest - posttest | 7.459               | 2.022          | .332            | 6.785                                     | 8.134 | 22.440 | 36 | .000            |

## **4. Discussion**

The purpose of this research study was to answer the question: Is Thought Field Therapy (TFT) an effective intervention to reduce emotional distress related to experiencing trauma in clients diagnosed with a Substance Use Disorder (SUD)? The results indicate that following one session of TFT, client's levels of distress decreased significantly. The most significant finding is that 100% of all participants had a reduction in symptoms. This proves that TFT serves as an effective and safe therapeutic tool to reduce negative emotions associated with past traumas and ongoing life challenges.

It is common knowledge that traditional psychotherapy takes time and does not produce therapeutic results rapidly. This could be an indication that true psychological change takes extensive time and effort, or, it could be that therapies based on those traditional notions are not efficiently treating the whole person. Based on this research, it appears that TFT does not need to be a complete alternative to more traditional cognitive-behavioral or psychodynamic approaches, but rather be integrated. By working with the body's own ability to encode and release emotional information, TFT can be that missing piece that vastly enhances the effectiveness of psychotherapy.

### **4.1. Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, this research did not complete follow up to determine if the improvements remained in the long-term. Furthermore, there were no comparison groups to compare those who received TFT with those who did not. Finally, given the multiple therapeutic modalities offered at SpiritLife Inc., it can not be determined that TFT is the sole reason for the significant reduction in symptoms.

## **4.2. Implications**

Many critics scrutinize the lack of sound empirical evidence demonstrating the validity of TFT. Although TFT has been beneficial for many people, it may not work for everyone. Some critics suggest that people could experience the placebo effect, having high expectations and thinking the treatment is working, when really it isn't. The subjective reports of those who have participated in treatment could give a false sense of hope for others. Additionally, the procedure of TFT includes some physical contact between the practitioner and the client, so those who have a certain history of trauma may be uncomfortable with this procedure.

## **4.3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it appears that TFT can effectively and efficiently reduce the perceived intensity of distress and improve physiological symptoms from a single counseling session. These findings are consistent with the multitude of anecdotal clinician and client reports regarding the immediate impact of TFT. The hope is for this research, along with future studies that will follow, for practitioners to embrace TFT as a viable modality worthy of learning and implementing in everyday practice.

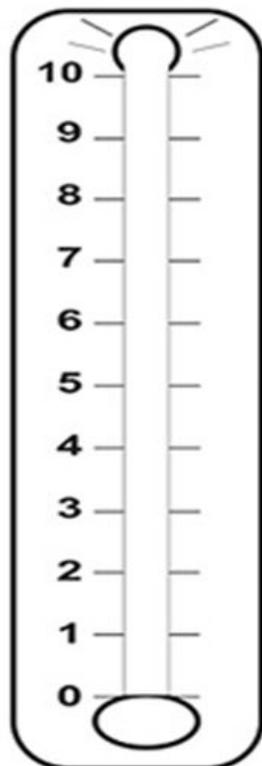
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## Appendix A

Please indicate your initial level of Distress:



- 10 - Highest distress/fear/anxiety/discomfort that you have ever felt
- 9 - Extremely anxious/distressed
- 8 - Very anxious/distressed, can't concentrate
- 7 - Quite anxious/distressed, interfering with performance
- 6 -
- 5 - Moderate anxiety/distress, uncomfortable but can continue to perform
- 4 -
- 3 - Mild anxiety/distress, no interference with performance
- 2 - Minimal anxiety/distress
- 1 - Alert and awake, concentrating well
- 0 - Totally relaxed

After my session with Jim, I feel: (Please use numerical rating, based on the scale above)

- EXTREMELY RELIEVED
- FAIRLY RELIEVED
- NO CHANGE AT ALL

Comments:

I would/would not recommend these sessions to other clients.

I permit this confidential information to be used for research to help the work with other clients.

INITIALS: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_