Treatments stretch boundaries — and credibility

By Sandra G. Boydman
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Imagine being able to quickly banish phobias by rhythmically tapping on various body parts. How about a painless treatment that eliminates depression by exerting gentle pressure on a patient's shoulders or torso? What if it were possible to overcome attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by focusing a child's focus on a computer image that retraining his brain waves? These are among the promises made by many practitioners of the following alternative treatments — thought field therapy (TFT), craniosacral therapy, and neurofeedback — that are increasingly being used to treat an encyclopedic array of psychological and behavioral problems.

Experts estimate that about 200 alternative mental health treatments are on the market today — and said that unorthodox therapies are on the market, said Scott O. Lilliefeld, an associate professor of psychology at Emory University in Atlanta and an expert on unorthodox therapies. Some, such as relaxation exercises and yoga, are widely used as part of specific physical and mental health treatments and have been subjected to at least some scientific study. But others, including past life therapy and autogenic neural therapy, have little or no grounding in science. While alternative psychological treatments have always existed, experts say, the Internet has been a boon to alternative practitioners, enabling them to reach vast audiences easily.

"The rapidity of marketing is unprecedented," said Lilliefeld, founding editor of the Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice, a semi-annual journal devoted to examining the theory and practice of both alternative and conventional therapies. Lilliefeld and others say the growth of many alternative therapies contravenes the move in psychology toward evidence-based treatments.

The majority of unorthodox therapies, Lilliefeld said, amount to pseudoscience; they are based on unvalidated theories and bolstered by anecdote. Few have been subject to peer review and most have never been validated by studies that randomly assign patients to receive different treatments and control for factors such as the placebo effect — improvement not attributable to treatment — that can skew the results.

Among the more notable examples, in the view of Lilliefeld, was a 17-year-old girl in Colorado who succumbed to autism and behavioral problems after being held under a blanket by therapists trying to cure her behavioral problems.

Alternative therapies often sound convincing, observed James D. Herbert, an associate professor of psychology at Drexel University in Philadelphia, who has analyzed some of them. "They're packaged very nicely, there's a lot of psychobabble, a lot of jargon, and they sound impressive to therapists who aren't well trained and to patients desperate for help.

Unlike conventional therapy, alternative approaches often claim to be useful for a huge array of unrelated problems. By contrast, conventional treatments typically have narrow applications. John Upledger, the osteopath who developed craniosacral therapy, said in an interview that his hands-on treatment can vanquish depression, chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, migraines, scoliosis, and colic — among other ailments.

Roger J. Callahan, the clinical psychologist who invented thought field therapy, said his tapping treatment has a 98 percent success rate and works for "almost everything." While many alternative mental health treatments do not appear to be harmful, some are costly. The expense and energy devoted to these treatments could prevent or delay the pursuit of more effective and less expensive therapies, Lilliefeld noted.

But experts concede that the popularity of alternative medicine stems in part from the shortcomings of traditional approaches. A study by researchers at Harvard Medical School published in 2001 found that 66 percent of parents treated for anxiety and severe depression also used alternative therapies, including meditation, for these conditions — and that they found alternative methods as helpful as conventional treatments.

Below is a discussion of some alternative therapies that both critics and proponents agree are increasing in popularity.

Neurofeedback

Neurofeedback, also known as EEG biofeedback, is being used to treat autism, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety, and even by those who want to improve their golf scores.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACH: Psychologist Deborah Stokes monitors a child's brain waves in a neurofeedback session.
TREATMENT

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The therapy’s best known and most hotly debated use is for ADHD. Some therapists say that neurofeedback can be used as an adjunct to stimulants such as Ritalin or can even eliminate the need for drugs; in combination with a behavioral program, medications have been shown to work in about 70 percent of cases.

During a typical neurofeedback session, which lasts about 45 minutes, electrodes are attached to a child’s forehead and connected to a small EEG machine linked to a computer. The child sits in a comfortable chair, watching a video display that resembles a video game. The operator watches the EEG readout to determine whether the child is emitting brain waves indicative of alert, focused state or a drowsy, inattentive state. The alert brain waves are rewarded by beeps, augmented by the treatment itself, the mother or father or the child to keep producing them.

The use of a noninvasive alternative appeals to many parents who say they are reluctant to prescribe medication for their child on medications and say they prefer a more “natural” approach.

Research on biofeedback has demonstrated that biofeedback can reduce seizures by altering brain waves. The goal for children with ADHD is to alter mental activity associated with slower brain waves that are believed to be related to impulsivity and inattention.

By remaining relaxed but focused, proponents say, the child learns through repeated sessions to produce brain waves that demonstrate sustained attention, thereby diminishing the hyperactivity and inability to concentrate that are the hallmark of ADHD.

“About 50 percent people have done after about 30 to 40 sessions,” said Deborah Stokes, a parent who three years ago opened Neurofeedback Consultants in Alexandria, Va. Stokes charges about $125 per session, which most insurance companies don’t cover. Many of her clients learned about the treatment from Internet support groups or that friends had tried it for hyperactive children, she said.

But critics say that the evidence to support the widespread use for ADHD is shaky.

Psychologist John Kline, an EEG expert and professor at the University of Alabama in Mobile, said studies over the past decade have been marred by poor research design or compromised by other factors, such as the use of multiple treatments simultaneously and a lack of randomization.

“The literature that ties brain wave changes to treatment outcomes is really tentative,”

Screen in Stokes’ office, playing what he calls “brain games.”

“Almost immediately we saw a decrease in hyperactivity, and we got feedback from other people who didn’t know he was doing this treatment that he was better,” Paulding said.

Craniosacral Therapy

In the 19 years since osteopath John Updelder opened his eponymous Institute in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., more than 50,000 therapists from 50 countries have taken courses he devised to treat dozens of ailments. Treatment is simple: Craniosacral therapists exert gentle pressure on various parts of the body where they detect pulse points in order to release what they say are blockages of cerebrospinal fluid that cause problems.

Updelder, now 72, dismisses the importance of randomized controlled trials and the views of his critics. Proof of the effectiveness of his treatment, he said, lies in the testimonials of grateful patients who tell him they feel better — like the woman who had sought treatment at 83 other places before a single visit with Updelder cured her temporomandibular joint disorder.

Standard scientific studies of his technique “can’t be done,” he said, because the two patients are exactly alike and no two therapists are exactly alike. I decided that what I was feeling was what I could believe.”

Stephen Barrett, a retired psychiatrist who maintains the Quackwatch Web site, has described Updelder’s beliefs as being “among the strangest I
Thought Field Therapy

Clinical psychologist Roger J. Callahan of La Quinta said he discovered thought field therapy 25 years ago, when he tapped once under a patient's eye, instantly curing her of a severe fear of water. The tapping cleared a blockage of energy in her "thought field" which, in Callahan's view, is similar to an electrical field. Thought fields occur in the body, according to Callahan, and psychological problems and environmental toxins can cause blockages, also referred to as "perturbations," which proper tapping can eliminate.

"It certainly appears ridiculous," Callahan said in an interview, "but if you try it you'll see it's the most important treatment in history."

Here's how it is said to work: A therapist uses a series of pre-ordained, rhythmic finger taps called "algorithms" on various points on the body. The taps and body parts vary according to the problem being treated. During the tapping, the patient engages in a repetitive activity: repeating the alphabet or humming snippets of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" while thinking about a distressing situation.

These repetitive activities are supposed to correct disturbances in the thought fields that cause myriad psychological problems, including phobias, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. The cost of sessions varies, but many thought field therapists charge between $75 and $150.

Several published studies have found that thought field therapy, or TFT, was useful in treating trauma, depression and other problems, but none of the studies was subject to standard peer review.

To Drexel's Herbert, TFT is "silly" and a classic example of pseudoscience. "Despite extraordinary claims to the contrary, there is absolutely no scientific evidence for any of this," he said.

In 1989 the Arizona Board of Psychologist Examiners recommended a psychologist for using TFT in his practice, according to the Quackwatch Web site. The American Psychological Association has also announced that thought field courses are not approved for continuing education credits.

Callahan said that his treatment works and that he believes his critics have a "poor problem" and are worried that TFT will rob them of business.

Washington social worker Deborah L. Taylor said that for the past five years she has been performing the treatment during sessions with phobic or anxious clients. "There's more proof that it's helpful than that it's not helpful," said Taylor. "It's a tool."

In some cases, it can be an expensive tool.

The most advanced TFT courses for therapists involve the purchase of a "voice technology" machine coupled with three-day courses of individualized training with Callahan at a cost of $100,000. Voice technology enables therapists to diagnose and treat patients sight unseen, over the phone by analyzing their voices.

"A TFT Voice Technology practitioner has the potential for the whole world as their clients," Callahan's Web site notes.

RIGHT, OPERATOR'S VIEW: EEG readouts show brain waves said to indicate alert and inattentive states.