

Rapport, variation, repetition, mindful awareness and values: five pillars of successful psychotherapy

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Opinion

The journey of psychotherapy is a collaborative exploration of behavior, mind, and emotions, an interpersonal endeavor that, when successful, can lead to profound and lasting change. While numerous therapeutic modalities exist, a growing body of evidence and clinical wisdom points to five fundamental pillars that underpin effective treatment: a strong therapeutic rapport, the thoughtful application of variation in techniques or processes, the strategic use of repetition, the cultivation of mindful awareness, and taking action in line with one's values.

At the heart of any successful therapeutic endeavor lies the relationship between the client and the therapist. This connection, known as therapeutic rapport, is a bond built on trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Parallel to this foundational relationship is the necessity of variation. A skilled therapist draws from a diverse toolkit, tailoring their approach to the unique needs of each client. The third pillar, repetition, provides the mechanism for solidifying change, using practice to transform new, healthier patterns into automatic habits.

Emerging as a critically important fourth pillar is mindful awareness. This is the practice of paying attention to the present moment—to thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and external stimuli—without judgment. It is a state of active, open attention to the here and now. Cultivating this awareness allows clients to observe their internal experiences without being overwhelmed by them, creating the mental space necessary for change.

The fifth essential pillar involves taking action in line with one's values or the direction you intend to follow in life. This is not simply goals, but a higher spiritual direction that can inform action toward the goals.

This article delves into the individual and collective importance of these four pillars, highlighting how their integration creates a powerful synergy for psychotherapeutic success. We explore how this framework is embodied in a range of therapeutic models, from Energy Psychology (EP) variants to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Clarifying the framework: a heuristic model

The five pillars presented here—rapport, variation, repetition, mindful awareness, and values—are intended as a heuristic framework rather than a rigid, universal model. They serve as adaptable guidelines that therapists can use to navigate diverse clinical realities. The true power of this model lies in its flexibility and its capacity to be tailored to the unique needs and contexts of each client, rather than being applied as a one-size-fits-all solution.

The bedrock of healing: the power of rapport

The therapeutic relationship is the crucible in which change becomes possible. It is a safe and non-judgmental space where clients can feel seen, heard, and understood. Research consistently shows the quality of this alliance is a primary predictor of positive outcomes, regardless of the specific therapeutic approach.¹⁻³ Carl Rogers, a pioneer of humanistic psychology, emphasized the therapist's role in providing "unconditional positive regard." This acceptance fosters the safety needed for genuine self-exploration. The therapist is aware but not distracted by the "pathology" and maintains attention on the health within the person, the unblemished soul. Also, as Rogers famously stated, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change".⁴

The art of adaptation: the importance of variation

A one-size-fits-all approach to mental health is rarely effective. An integrative practitioner who can adapt their approach to the evolving needs of the client is essential. A 2014 article in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* highlighted that therapeutic flexibility is a key trait of effective therapists.⁵ This adaptability allows the therapist to meet clients where they are, fostering a more dynamic and responsive therapeutic process. This variability is germane to natural selection and evolution, which entails adaptation to the present environment or context. Life forms that have such adaptability via variability survive, prosper, and procreate. In a similar way, therapeutic processes that entail variability increase the individual's flexibility and ability to prosper by alleviating rigid unadaptable patterns.

Rewiring the brain: the necessity of repetition

Lasting change requires practice and reinforcement. Repetition is the engine that drives this process, helping to carve out new bioenergy and neural pathways in the brain and overwrite maladaptive patterns. This principle is most explicit in therapeutic models where clients experience changes in the moment and are often given assignments to practice new skills, thus altering inflexible patterns. This repeated engagement is rooted in neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new connections. Recent research continues to underscore that this dynamic process is fundamental

for learning, memory, and even recovery from injury across the lifespan.⁶ And fundamentally, this involves an alteration of bioenergy and information patterns, often conceptualized using a phase space description.

The phase space of an individual’s psychological state can be thought of as a multi-dimensional map where each point represents a unique combination of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors at a given moment.^{7,8} An unhealthy, rigid pattern, such as anxiety, can be described as a small, confined region within this space—a “psychological attractor” that the person repeatedly returns to. Effective therapy, through repetition and other pillars, helps the individual escape this narrow, maladaptive pattern, allowing for new, more expansive, and adaptive patterns to emerge within the phase space. This process facilitates a fundamental shift in a person’s psychological landscape.

The power of presence: cultivating mindful awareness

Mindful awareness has become a cornerstone of many modern therapeutic approaches.⁹ By learning to observe their thoughts, feelings, and sensations as transient events, rather than as absolute truths, clients can de-identify and distance from their pain. This practice creates a crucial pause between stimulus and response, allowing for more intentional and less reactive choices. As Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh explained, “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers”.¹⁰

As the therapist maintains positive presence, the client synchronizes with this energy. In therapy, this “blooming” is the client’s growing ability to manage their inner world with compassion and wisdom.

Table 1 Comparative application of the five pillars of psychotherapy—rapport, variation, repetition, mindful awareness, and values—in Energy Psychology (EP) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Pillar	Energy psychology (EP)	Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)
Rapport	Therapist provides gentle guidance and a safe space, often in a non-traditional, collaborative way.	Therapist and client are equal partners in a compassionate and non-judgmental alliance.
Variation	Uses diagnostic tools (e.g., muscle testing) to select from a variety of techniques (tapping, breathing, eye movements) tailored to the individual.	Uses a hexagon of six core processes, flexibly moving between them based on the client's needs.
Repetition	Uses repeated tapping sequences and assigned exercises to reinforce changes and create new neural and bioenergetic pathways.	Encourages repeated practice of mindfulness exercises, defusion techniques, and small, "committed actions" that align with values.
Mindful awareness	The client mindfully holds a distressing thought or feeling, albeit lightly, for the tapping to be effective. The process itself requires present-moment attention.	The explicit heart of the model. Cultivated through numerous formal and informal exercises to help clients unhook from thoughts and connect with the world directly.
Values & action	While not a core tenet, some models (e.g., EDxTM™) use a process (e.g., OPP) to help clients conceptualize their future path and move in a positive direction.	An explicit core process. Therapy is centered on identifying and taking committed action toward a rich, full, and meaningful life.

Energy psychology variants

Energy psychology approaches are built on the premise that emotional issues are tied to disruptions in the body’s energy system.¹¹ Treatment often involves focusing on a distressing issue while stimulating acupuncture points.

- a) **TFT (Thought field therapy):** The original “tapping therapy” and a widely known variant of energy psychology, developed by Roger J. Callahan, TFT also integrates these pillars.^{11,12} It uses a flexible “tapping” sequence derived from muscle testing

Values: a compass for action

Values are an essential component of successful psychotherapy, serving as a compass that guides a person’s life and therapeutic journey. Unlike fleeting goals or desires, values represent an individual’s deepest-held beliefs and principles about what is meaningful, important, and worth living for. Values are not something you achieve; they are a direction you continuously move towards. In therapy, exploring and clarifying a client’s values provides a powerful framework for change. When clients identify their values, they can begin to make choices and take actions that are consistent with those values. This pillar of values allows for a shift in perspective. Instead of focusing solely on reducing symptoms or eliminating negative feelings, therapy can become a process of building a rich and meaningful life despite the presence of pain or discomfort. The aim isn’t to be free of all problems, but to engage in life fully, in a way that feels authentic and purposeful. This shift from symptom reduction to value-driven action is a critical component of lasting psychological well-being.

A modern synthesis: how therapeutic models embody these pillars

The true power of these five pillars lies in their seamless integration. Various therapeutic models, from the traditional to the cutting-edge, demonstrate this synthesis in unique ways.

A comparative look at EP and ACT modalities

To better understand the distinctions and overlaps between the therapeutic models discussed, here’s a brief comparative Table 1.

diagnostic procedures. Rapport is crucial for the therapist to gently guide the client. The variation comes from targeting various aspects or holons of a problem and measuring their intensity or negative energy. The repetition of the tapping and other processes (i.e., 9Gamut Treatments, Floor-to-Ceiling Eye Roll, Collarbone Breathing Exercises, etc.) reinforces the changes. The entire process is an exercise in mindful awareness, as the client pays close attention to the shifts in their emotional and physical state via a subjective unit of distress scale (SUDS) and possibly changes in muscle responses as they tap. While TFT doesn’t specifically focus on values, Callahan assumed that

assisting a person to neutralize negative states made it possible for them to move in positive directions in life.

- b) EFT (Emotional freedom techniques):** A widely known variant of energy psychology, developed by Gary Craig,^{11,13} EFT also integrates these pillars. It uses a standardized “tapping” sequence, but the application is highly varied. Rapport is crucial for the therapist to gently guide the client. The variation comes from the creative use of language and the targeting of different “aspects” of a problem. The repetition of the tapping sequence while voicing setup phrases reinforces the changes. The entire process is an exercise in mindful awareness, as the client pays close attention to the shifts in their emotional and physical state as they tap and repeat reminder phrases. Also, frequently the reminder phrases entail a positive direction in life, namely a life consistence with your values.
- c) EDxTM™ (Energy diagnostic and treatment methods):** Developed by Fred P. Gallo, this model also exemplifies the five aspects.¹⁴ Rapport is essential for a client to feel safe and secure enough to explore painful states, sensations, and memories, although the exposure is light. Variation is present in its use of diagnostic tools like muscle testing to select from a wide array of specific interventions (tapping, breathing patterns, eye movements, imagery, etc.) or specific sequences such as the Midline Technique (MLT) and Vanishing Image Technique (VIT). Repetition is used in tapping sequences and other processes to defuse from and neutralize emotional charge, and is offered as assignments to instill self-efficacy. Additionally, the results are stabilized and reinforced by utilizing the Outcome Projection Procedure (OPP) that supports taking action toward one’s values and goals. Mindful awareness is the very foundation of the process, as the client must mindfully hold the distressing thought or feeling, albeit lightly and with acceptance and willingness in awareness for the treatment to be effective. Concerning Values and Action the Outcome Projection Procedure (OPP) assists the person to conceptualize as vividly as possible the path they want to follow after disengaging from the presenting problem.

There are many other EP and related methods that also emphasize these powerful pillars, although there is limited space to elaborate (perhaps a future book). My apologies to practitioners of the wide range of EP processes.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

ACT is a mindfulness-based therapy that does not aim to eliminate difficult feelings but to change how one relates to them. Its goal is to help individuals live a rich, full, and meaningful life while accepting the pain that inevitably comes with it.^{9,15}

- (i) Rapport in ACT is a collaborative and compassionate partnership where the therapist and client are equals, exploring the client’s experience side-by-side.
- (ii) Variation is core to ACT, which draws from a hexagon of six core processes (acceptance, cognitive de-fusion, being present, self-as-context, values, and committed action). Lazarus’s Multimodal approach is relevant in this regard as well, and any approach that focuses on variation is consistent with the findings of Natural Selection. The therapist flexibly moves between these components based on the client’s needs.
- (iii) Repetition is vital. Clients repeatedly practice mindfulness exercises, de-fusion techniques (e.g., seeing thoughts as just words/sounds), and values-clarification exercises. They are

encouraged to take small, repeated “committed actions” that align with their values, actualizing what matters most to them.

- (iv) Mindful awareness is the explicit heart of ACT. The pillar of “being present” is cultivated through numerous formal and informal mindfulness exercises, helping clients to unhook from their thoughts and connect with the world directly.
- (v) Values and Action involve being congruent with the path you want to follow in life and following this direction in thoughts and behaviors.

Acknowledging cultural and systemic realities

Therapy doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It is crucial to acknowledge that cultural and systemic factors profoundly influence how clients engage with and respond to treatment.¹⁶ For marginalized populations, traditional therapeutic models may not fully address the various factors impacting them.

These factors can affect everything from a client’s willingness to trust a therapist to the very language they use to describe their struggles. Therefore, for therapy to be truly effective, it must be culturally congruent. This involves the therapist showing humility, understanding the client’s unique cultural background and worldview, and adapting their approach accordingly. This might include incorporating traditional healing practices or collaborating with community leaders. For Indigenous populations, this could mean integrating Indigenous healing systems, which often emphasize the interconnectedness of mind, body, spirit, and community.¹⁷ These systems, such as talking circles or ceremonies, offer culturally relevant pathways to healing that respect Indigenous traditions and worldviews.

Case example: applying the five pillars in practice

Consider “Maria,” a 35-year-old woman seeking therapy for chronic anxiety and a feeling of being stuck. She reports difficulty making decisions and a persistent fear of judgment, often leading her to withdraw from social situations and career opportunities.

Rapport: From the first session, the therapist prioritizes establishing a safe, trusting relationship. The therapist listens with genuine empathy, validating Maria’s feelings of fear and frustration without judgment. This rapport allows Maria to open up about her deepest anxieties, laying the groundwork for the therapeutic work to begin.

Mindful awareness: The therapist introduces Maria to mindful awareness exercises. Instead of trying to “fix” or suppress her anxiety, Maria learns to observe her anxious thoughts and physical sensations—a pounding heart, a tightness in her chest—as temporary events, not as absolute threats. To help her engage with these sensations without being overwhelmed, the therapist might introduce tapping (acupressure) on specific points, such as the Small Intestine acupoint (SI-3) on the little finger side of a hand while asking her to state several times, “Even though I have chronic anxiety and being stuck, I accept myself.” This is followed by tapping on a specific series of additional acupoints (e.g., acupoints on the bony orbits under eyes, under collarbones, etc.). Maria also practices 4:8 breathing, inhaling for a count of four and exhaling for a count of eight. The tapping and breathing techniques help calm her nervous system, providing a physical anchor while she mindfully observes her anxiety sensations, effectively creating a space between her and her reaction to the emotion. The focus is not on attempting to get rid of the anxiety,

since that could further stimulate the sensations, but rather to accept and observe while tapping and breathing as described.

Repetition: To solidify this new skill, the therapist gives Maria the assignment to practice this process between sessions. She is asked to practice mindful awareness with tapping and 4:8 breathing for just five to ten minutes each day, specifically observing her anxious feelings without reacting to them. This repetition is key to building new neural pathways, helping Maria's brain and body learn a new, less reactive response to anxiety.

Values: Once Maria has some space from her anxiety, the therapist shifts the focus to her values (although at times it may be helpful to begin therapy with a focus on values and goals). They explore what truly matters to her beyond her fears. Maria identifies that she values connection, creativity, and personal growth. The therapist helps her see that anxiety thoughts and sensations do not have to prevent her from living a life aligned with these values, and that she has efficient ways to distance from and possibly reduce the intensity of anxiety via mindful awareness, tapping, and breathing exercises.

Variation & action: This is where the framework's variation becomes essential, leading to value-driven action. The therapist uses a variety of techniques to help Maria actualize her values. Utilizing the Outcome Projection Procedure (OPP), Maria is guided to tap at specific acupoints while vividly imagining herself living a life aligned with her values: a life filled with creative projects and authentic connections, free from the paralyzing fear of judgment. This mental rehearsal acts as a powerful motivator. Maria then commits to taking small, tangible steps (committed actions) that align with her values. The therapist adapts the approach, moving between mindfulness, values-work, exposure exercises, and specific techniques like tapping and breathing, ensuring the therapy remains dynamic and effective.

Through this process, Maria begins to make choices not from a place of fear but from her values. Perhaps she starts attending a class consistent with her interests, a small step aligned with her values. Her anxiety doesn't disappear entirely, but she learns to engage in life fully, taking repeated, value-driven actions despite its presence. The five pillars, working in synergy, transform her from a person paralyzed by fear into someone moving purposefully toward a meaningful life.

The synergy of success: an integrated path to healing

The journey to psychological well-being is not linear and rarely relies on a single magical technique. Instead, lasting change is built upon a foundation of core principles. A trusting rapport creates the safety to begin and sustain the work. Therapeutic variation provides the customized tools for the individual's unique journey. Strategic repetition carves the new neural and behavioral pathways that make change permanent. And overarching it all is mindful awareness, the capacity to be present with your own experience, and taking action according to your values which unlocks the ability to use these tools effectively.

The convergence of these five pillars across seemingly disparate therapeutic models reveals a deeper truth about what facilitates human healing. It is the dynamic interplay of a supportive relationship, a flexible toolkit, dedicated practice, and the profound power of presence that unlocks our innate capacity for growth and transformation in line with the individual's values and goals.

Limitations and future directions

While the five pillars provide a valuable framework, this model, as

it is with all models, has limitations and points toward future research and development.^{18–20}

Limitations

- (i) **Empirical support:** While there's a strong evidence base for rapport, repetition, and mindful awareness, the specific integration of all five pillars—especially in the context of Energy Psychology—requires more robust research. The effectiveness of EP modalities themselves is still a topic of ongoing scientific debate and requires further controlled studies.
- (ii) **Adaptability:** While presented as a heuristic, there is a risk that practitioners may apply this framework too rigidly, failing to account for the unique needs of different cultural groups and individuals. The model could benefit from more specific guidance on how to ethically and effectively apply the pillars in diverse settings.
- (iii) **The “Unblemished Soul” concept:** The article's reference to the “unblemished soul” introduces a metaphysical concept that might not resonate with or be applicable to all clients or practitioners, particularly those who hold different spiritual or secular beliefs. A more inclusive framing could be beneficial.

Future directions

- (i) **Training and supervision:** These pillars could be operationalized as a core curriculum in psychotherapy training programs, teaching aspiring therapists not just specific techniques but also the underlying principles of a successful therapeutic process. This could include training on how to build culturally competent rapport and how to flexibly apply therapeutic strategies. Supervisors could use the pillars as a framework for case consultations.
- (ii) **Policy contexts:** The pillars could inform policy around mental health services. For example, policies could be designed to promote and reimburse for integrative care that includes a focus on mindfulness and value-driven action, rather than just symptom reduction.
- (iii) **Cross-cultural research:** Future research could explore how these pillars manifest in different cultures and how they can be adapted to be more effective and ethical in a global context. This could include collaborative research with practitioners of Indigenous healing systems to understand and validate their unique approaches.^{18–20}

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