

# Mindful energy psychology: the reciprocal synergy of integrating mindfulness and energy psychology

## Abstract

Both mindfulness practices such as meditation and some energy psychology approaches have been shown to be effective in the treatment of various psychological conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Some therapeutic approaches have synergistically combined mindfulness practices, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). This article also proposes an integration of mindfulness and energy psychology for reciprocal synergy.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, mindfulness-based therapy, energy psychology, energy therapy, trauma, PTSD, midline energy treatment, energy diagnostic and treatment methods

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Fred P Gallo

Gallo and Associates Psychological Services, USA

**Correspondence:** Fred P Gallo, Owner, Gallo and Associates Psychological Services, Private Practice Hermitage, PA, 60 Snyder RD Hermitage, PA 16148, USA, Tel 7243463838, Email fgallo@energypsych.com

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## Abbreviations:

MBCT, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy; EP, energy psychology; ACC, anterior cingulate cortex; TFT, thought field therapy; EDxTM, energy diagnostic and treatment methods; MET, midline energy treatment

## Conceptual paper

In early June 1968, I graduated from college. The day after graduation was a beautiful, sunny June day and I was driving my Volkswagen Bug to the university's student union to meet friends when a car much larger than mine smashes into me, ripping off my driver's door, and sending my car spinning like a top. The impact threw me out of my car and into the air in what seemed to be slow motion, into some wooden steps that broke from the impact of my body. I then bounced and slid over a banister, slid along a side walk and rolled over onto my front before coming to an abrupt stop. Immediately, I tried to get up, and I could feel that I was bleeding internally. I rolled over onto my back and looked up at the sky, terrified that I was going to die. I shout, "No! I'm not going to die! I refuse! I'm not ready." I believe that affirmation and determination was a key to my survival.

I had many injuries, including a ruptured spleen. I underwent surgery, received 6 pints of blood and my life hung in the balance for several days. I was in ICU for four days, in the hospital for ten days altogether and recovered at home over the next two months. Even though my physical condition improved quickly, I continued to be emotionally distressed for many years: fear when I was driving, anxiety, flashbacks and frequent episodes of panic with the feeling that I was going to die. I resolved the driving phobia over a period of time by learning to relax my hold on the steering wheel while driving. And I overcame panic by riding out a severe attack one evening about ten years after the accident. Back then, I had many panic attacks and I became especially disgusted with this one, since it continued for over two hours. After many attempts to get rid of it, out of frustration and resignation, I decided to go into the panic and try to intensify it. I closed my eyes and went into the panic into the abyss so to speak. With defiance, I said, "Come and get me!"

The curious result was the opposite; the panic instantly vanished. I had come face-to-face with my fear, did not waver and the panic was gone. About a week later, the aura of another panic attack

started and again I surrendered into the sensations. And again! Presto abracadabra! Gone! I searched for any inkling of the panic in my body, but it was gone. The satisfaction I felt about this serendipitous discovery! From then on, I no longer lived in dread of panic. Even if a twinge of anxiety occurred, I faced it, observed it, and it would vanish. I also knew that I could not use this approach to outwit panic and anxiety, since "they" would surely know. I had to truly want to immerse myself in it, no matter what. I had to be for real. In today's parlance, I had to be authentically mindful.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is purposeful and non-judgmental observation of your present moment experience. Mostly the focus is on mental activity, but mindfulness can also be applied to eating, walking, really almost any activity, and especially your approach to life as a whole. Mindfulness involves tuning into the present moment and the flow of experience instead of resisting. It also involves acceptance of the impermanence of things: that things naturally change moment to moment. The position of the Ionian philosopher Heraclitus is apropos: You cannot step into the same river twice. When life is approached in this way, struggling and suffering are greatly reduced and possibly even eliminated. But trying to get rid of pain is not what mindfulness is about. It is not a mindful position to try to get rid of something, since that signals resistance and struggle. To quote Haruki Murakami,<sup>1</sup> "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional". Deep acceptance, indeed more than acceptance allowing and observing is a formula for transcending suffering.

While this might sound like resignation, that's not what mindfulness involves. Surrendering is a more accurate sentiment or virtue. When one is mindful, it is likely that creativity and achievement are enhanced, since being in the flow of experience appears to be an essential aspect of creativity.<sup>2</sup> A mindful position may harness the needed mental energy for actualizing aspirations. Additionally mindfulness is not a matter of giving up all desire and interest. There are many ways to nurture a mindful approach to living. One way is to practice meditation. Returning to the breath each time you get caught up in thought is a long held meditative practice. In this practice you maintain focus on your breath as a whole, or the out breath, or equalizing both in and out breaths. Getting caught up in thought and returning to the breath is done in a casual way, not as

a struggle. The meditator realizes that she has become immersed in thought, punctuates it as “thinking,” and comfortably returns to the breath.

Another approach is to use a mantra or preferred sound or phrase as home base so to speak, returning to the mantra each time you get caught up in thought, distressing emotion, etc. In energy psychology, an affirmation, cue word, or reminder phrase might mimic mantras to some extent.<sup>3</sup> Centering prayer is another approach to mindful meditation with the added dimension of consenting to connection with God.<sup>4</sup> Another approach is to simply observe the flow of thoughts, without attachment to them. Each time a thought occurs, you look to the “horizon”, awaiting the emergence of the next thought. Thoughts are not truly constant; there are spaces between them, just as there is space or silence between the notes of a musical composition or the infinitesimal gaps between the frames of a film that project the illusion of movement onto the theatre screen.

These and many other meditative processes are much easier to write about than to practice. We humans tend to get caught up in our thoughts, which can remove us experientially from our present moment experience. When absorbed in thought, generally the thinker is focused on the past or the future, and not consciously being in the present moment, the NOW. Meditation is a practice of living more in the now, although a bit of not-now is involved in the process as well. For example, it is necessary to remember to come back to the breath or mantra during moments of getting absorbed in the thought world; and memory is not really now at all. Memory occurs in the now and also distracts us from now. Yet the realization of being lost in thought and remembering to come back to the breath, supports being more fully in present.

At the most profound level, mindfulness practices are a way of living in the present moment more frequently. Meditation “on the go” involves returning one’s attention to the present moment whenever getting caught up in thought, distress, etc. A way to do this is by keeping a certain amount of attention on your own presence, on your own feet standing and moving on the ground, sitting on a chair, observing flavors and smells and listening to music. It’s not that memories or putting attention on possible futures is never the thing to do, since memory supports learning, and thoughts of future plans make it possible to create. Thought can be a useful map. All that we witness is a function of our thoughts. However being able to come back to the present moment at your choosing is a valuable asset that supports mind-body health. It’s also been proposed that savoring enjoyable experiences can help to promote less reactivity of the amygdale.<sup>5</sup>

When practicing mindfulness, life often changes in healthy ways simply in the process of living itself. This same approach is integral to psychotherapy and many other human endeavors. With regard to psychotherapy, some approaches that include an appreciable degree of mindfulness include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction,<sup>6-8</sup> Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy,<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention,<sup>10</sup> Dialectical Behavior Therapy<sup>11,12</sup> and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.<sup>13</sup> There are also other approaches rooted in mindfulness that do not have brand names. For example, Schwartz<sup>14</sup> developed a treatment for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder that relies heavily on teaching patients how to apply mindfulness awareness to alleviate obsessive thoughts and compulsions.<sup>14</sup> In this instance the patient is educated in detail about OCD, the “brain glitch” factors involved, and instructed to mindfully observe by making a statement

such as, “It’s not me; it’s OCD,” followed by engaging in an activity other than the compulsive behaviors for a few minutes. There has been considerable research support for the various mindfulness-based therapies listed herein, including randomized controlled trials.<sup>15</sup>

Research on mindfulness has shown that it improves attention and emotional regulation, promotes well-being and a less rigid sense of self, prevents recurrent depression and more. Brain scans demonstrate that mindfulness increases oxygen and blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, especially the left prefrontal cortex, which makes it possible to exercise easy control over emotional reactions that are mediated by mid-brain structures such as the amygdala. Mindfulness practices also help to develop the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which appears to be the “organ” of remembering to return to the breath or other present-moment activity.<sup>15-17</sup>

## Energy psychology

Energy psychology (EP) is a theoretical position that is applicable to human behavior in general and specifically to therapy, what is referred to as energy therapy. Energy psychology is consistent with findings in physics, especially quantum theory.<sup>18</sup> There is recognition that everything is comprised of energy. Energy is the capacity for work and movement. Superstring theory suggests that everything is comprised of vibrating little strings.<sup>19</sup> Is this what energy is? In the mind-body realm, the focus is partly on life energy, Prana or chi. This energy is not limited to the brain, but flows throughout the body and even outside of our physical bodies. As a result, energy psychology is focused on some ancient concepts such as meridians, chakras and auras or biofields. Even though hormones are involved in the process, the activity of the heart and nervous system are also energetic. For instance, action potential, which involves the flow of electrical impulses through nerves, is perpetuated by different chemical ions. Nonetheless energy is fundamental here.

Energy therapies involve various techniques, such as touching or tapping on acupoints, holding chakras, passing your hands over biofields and more. At the same time a specific issue is attuned, such as a traumatic memory, phobia or depression. The attunement can be done in various ways. If the problem is presently occurring, such as a phobic reaction, the feeling of depression, panic or a flashback, tapping meridian points (for instance) can be used to transmute the reaction, promote homeostasis and balance energy flow. Physically tapping at specific body locations can also be done while simply bringing the issue to mind without the level of distress that occurs in a “real life” situation. Otherwise, the patient can be prescribed to tap regularly, without actually bringing anything to mind, assuming that the tapping will maintain energetic balance and resolve anything that is “cooking” under the surface at the time. Treatment points can also be specifically diagnosed when necessary as in Thought Field Therapy (TFT), Energy Diagnostic and Treatment Methods (EDxTM) and several other EP methods.<sup>3,18,20</sup> Otherwise a comprehensive algorithm can be used, such as Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and the, Midline Energy Treatment (MET).<sup>18</sup> Consistent with the Law of Requisite Variety,<sup>21</sup> it is possibly best to have many options available, since a greater number of choices will improve the likelihood of treatment benefit.

While an extensive number of case reports and a fair amount of research demonstrate the effectiveness of specific approaches to energy psychology in the treatment of trauma/PTSD, phobias, depression, chronic pain and many other conditions, also several randomized control trials have been conducted in addition to non-

controlled studies.<sup>22</sup> Even though the latter approach is considered to be less predictive, some of the studies have been quite impressive in their service to people suffering from trauma, and they also support the effectiveness of EP.<sup>18,22–24</sup>

### Mindful energy psychology (MEP)

Although clinical experience and research supports the effectiveness of mindfulness therapies and energy psychology, it is evident that energy psychology techniques generally work much faster in terms of alleviating emotional distress. Nonetheless research demonstrates that over time, mindfulness practices result in specific changes in brain functioning that improves attention and emotional regulation, support a more fluid sense of self and promote well-being. Some studies have also shown changes in brain activity after EP treatments. Both meditation and EP have been shown to improve willpower, reduce stress and reduce urges to use drugs and alcohol, overeat, smoke and more.<sup>15,17,22</sup>

The author finds in his clinical practice that when EP techniques are combined with mindfulness, positive results are more efficiently and consistently achieved. Also a reciprocal synergy occurs, such that both mindfulness and EP are deepened and accelerated when combined. At the most basic level, the therapist maintains his or her own health by being mindful during the therapeutic process and also coaches the client to be mindful. When therapists are mindful, they are observant of moment-to-moment thoughts that can detract from the therapy and they readily return to a home base, such as perceiving the client's heart and soul. Thus the therapist maintains focus on the health within the client, which helps the therapist to also maintain a positive state which resonates with the client. This can be referred to this as the Michelangelo Principle, since that great Renaissance artist was reported to perceive the figure imprisoned within the rock and to set it free. Witness the breath taking Pieta and the statue of David. Similarly, the therapist helps the client to achieve freedom by drawing out the health within.

Other aspects of applying mindfulness with EP include “tapping mindfully” while observing changes in emotional sensations and subjective units of distress or SUD, instead of an emphasis on trying to get rid of the problem. Both therapist and client maintain this attitude. For example, the patient is supported in simply observing and becoming intimate with the emotional reaction while tapping. Whichever way it goes is fine. It is what it is. Maybe the patient simply becomes more comfortable with the pain or emotion as she observes and accepts it. Or perhaps the pain reduces or dissipates. In either case, suffering is transcended and bodily benefits occur. This is also essentially a Tonglen attitude about pain and a practice in compassion.<sup>25</sup> Tonglen fundamentally involves leveraging difficulty as well as pleasure for the benefit of yourself and others.

We might say that when therapist and client join in this way, they are meeting in the wilderness and discovering a path with heart to freedom, and perhaps even enlightenment. The focus is not on a problem that has to be eliminated, but on being present. In reality the concept of “problem” is a rather limited viewpoint. Fighting the “problem” produces more stress, more ego clinging. I've heard it said that Thomas Edison quipped about his work on perfecting the light bulb that he did not fail during the course of a thousand tries, but that he discovered a thousand ways that didn't work. That's a different perception, an encouraging one. And there is always more to discover and to create.

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### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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