

Swimming with sharks made easy

When psychotherapist Hilda Burke decided to learn tapping, an empowering east-meets-west therapeutic technique, she had no idea how powerful its effects would be

Have you ever imagined what it's like to be 15 metres below sea level without an oxygen tank and to have three bull sharks slowly circling in the deep blue 20 metres beneath you? Well, I experienced exactly that in the middle of the Sea of Cortez, off Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

It was blissful... But that is the end point of my story. To be able to calmly experience the majesty of those moments underwater required a personal journey, which commenced the previous week in northern California.

Unlock the negativity vault

As a psychotherapist, I had long been interested in exploring the field of energy psychology, a method of therapy that combines Eastern approaches to the mind and body with Western psychology and psychotherapy. To that end, I finally booked a week-long professional development course in tapping – or EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) as it's

sometimes called – at the renowned Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California.

My goal was to become a competent EFT practitioner, adding another skill to my therapeutic toolbox. During the week's course, working both individually and in pairs, we used tapping as a means to explore distressing past events and firmly entrenched negative beliefs. I quickly began to see its efficacy, particularly in comparison to talking therapy, where energetic and behavioural shifts can take months, if not years, to witness.

Best described as an 'emotional form of acupuncture', tapping works by unblocking negative energy stored within our bodies, which can manifest as thoughts and ideas, such as 'I never get anything done' or 'I leave everything until the last minute' or 'I won't ever make any money'. It's based on the belief that we hold our thoughts and feelings as energy in key physical points of the body (which correspond with the acupuncture points that were identified in >>>

“Tapping works by unblocking negative energy stored within our bodies, which can manifest as thoughts, such as ‘I never get anything done’”



traditional Chinese medicine several millennia ago) and that by lightly tapping on these areas, while simultaneously speaking our negative thoughts and feelings aloud, they can start to shift.

Accept the unaccepted

The cornerstone of the tapping technique is the setup statement in which the tapper promises to love themselves, despite having certain attributes or behaviour they struggle with and wish to change. Taking one of the negative thoughts I mentioned as an example, your setup statement would be: ‘Even though I never get anything done, I love and accept myself just as I am.’ You’d then tap gently through key acupressure points in the body, while repeating key words from this phrase, for example ‘never get anything done’.

At the start and end of any exercise, you note down your SUD score (subjective unit of distress – a scale of 0-10 that’s used to track anxiety levels when using tapping techniques; zero being lowest and 10 highest). In the entire week, I don’t recall one instance of someone’s SUD score *not* dropping using this application.

It seems counterintuitive to love yourself for something that you may have lugged around your whole life, however, what was interesting to me was the way that, once we began being forthcoming with acceptance over that aspect of ourselves, it created space for other thoughts and ideas to emerge.

Finishing the course, I looked forward to applying what I had learned with

clients when the opportunity arose. I left Esalen on a cloud, feeling elated from all that I had experienced. I was heading for Los Angeles to catch a flight to Mexico for my next adventure. Then, an hour outside LA, doing 85mph on the freeway, my tyre burst. I somehow managed to veer the car to the hard shoulder, but I was shaken and suddenly under serious time pressure to catch my flight. I felt frozen with panic, then I remembered I’d just spent a week learning a technique that was designed to deal with overwhelming situations like this.

The real menace

So I tapped on my fears that I might miss my flight. Within five minutes, my SUD score had dropped from an eight to a four. I still felt the stress of the situation but it was manageable. Crucially, it helped mobilise me to deal with the predicament, getting the car hirer to call a roadside assistance company, which turned up within 15 minutes. In the end, I made my flight quite comfortably.

The big challenge, though, was to come in Mexico, where I had booked myself

“The sharks were the least of my worries. What threatened to devour me were my anxieties around feeling unskilled, not sporty and being an underachiever”

on a freediving course – diving without an oxygen tank – with the IAM WATER foundation. I’d assumed that everyone in the group would be a beginner like me – in fact, a few were accomplished freedivers, half had been competitive swimmers and the remainder were career high-flyers, several of them TED or Davos speakers.

At this point, the sharks (who are uninterested in humans as long as they have access to a range of sea life) were the least of my worries. Instead, what threatened to devour me were my anxieties around feeling unskilled,

not sporty and being an underachiever.

Could I tap my way out of *this*? I worked on some of the prejudgements that had come up: ‘I’ve never been good at sports’; ‘I was the last kid to be chosen for any team’; ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’. As I worked through the tapping process, I was surprised how quickly these thoughts transformed into: ‘I’m unskilled because I’ve never done this before.’ ‘I’m here to learn and try something different.’

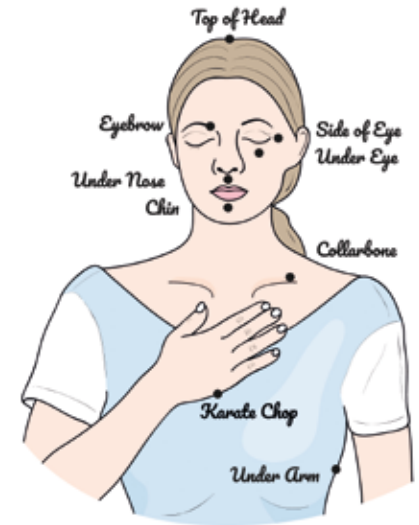
I can hear freedom

The next day, I dived down to the end of the training rope – six to eight metres – and felt excited. As the depth increased, I continued to remain confident in my ability, my breath, my body’s supply of oxygen. Eventually, I dived to 15 metres, close to the sharks – but, for me, the real achievement was getting out of my own way and letting myself explore my limits without prejudgement.

In so many ways, we use negative thoughts about ourselves to limit our achievements or, worse, to block us from loving ourselves. For many of us, it may feel challenging to love ourselves despite our ‘issues’ or flaws. For me, it was the thought that I’m not as much of a high achiever as others; I’m not as naturally sporty. Although I know rationally that I’ve found fulfilling ways to channel my talents, sometimes these old beliefs make their presence felt.

What was important was telling myself aloud that I liked myself, in spite of this ‘flaw’. This allowed me to recognise that I wanted to learn and I wasn’t there to be an expert. It’s only when we can love ourselves for what we perceive ourselves to be – our imperfect selves – that change can begin. Not for nothing is tapping called ‘emotional freedom technique’. As Carl Rogers, the father of humanistic psychology, said: ‘The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, I can change.’

Hilda Burke is author of ‘The Phone Addiction Workbook’ (Ulysses Press, £13.99). hildaburke.co.uk; @hilda_burke_psychotherapist



Easy tapping practices to try

The great thing about tapping is that once you learn the technique, you can do it anywhere. There are some excellent resources, including videos, on the EFT Universe website and it can be self-taught. Here is an overview of the basic EFT ‘recipe’:

The setup

‘Even though I have/am “x”, I deeply and completely love and accept myself. While reciting the setup statement, tap on the ‘karate chop’ point (see diagram above).

The sequence

This involves tapping on the eyebrow, side of the eye, under the eye, under the nose, chin, collarbone and underarm.

The ‘nine gamut procedure’

This is designed to engage parts of the brain involved in the resolution of trauma. It involves eye movements, humming and counting. It’s designed to engage both the left and right sides of the brain. The procedure is a 10-second process in which nine brain-stimulating actions are performed, while you tap continuously on one of the body’s energy points – the ‘gamut point’.

This point is located on the back of the hand, half an inch back from the midpoint between the knuckles at the base of the ring finger and the little finger. You perform these nine steps while tapping the gamut point continuously. They are:

1. Eyes closed.
2. Eyes open.
3. Eyes down hard right, while holding the head steady.
4. Eyes down hard left, while holding the head steady.
5. Roll the eyes in a circle as though your nose is at the centre of a clock and you are trying to see all of the numbers in order.
6. Roll the eyes in a circle in the reverse direction.
7. Hum two seconds of a song (*Happy Birthday* is an easy one, as long as it doesn’t hold negative feelings for you).
8. Count rapidly from one to five.
9. Hum two seconds of a song again. Use these steps in the exact order they have been given.

The sequence repeated

The final ingredient to this basic recipe is repeating the sequence and gamut procedure. If you have any remaining discomfort, perform another round of EFT tapping using a modified setup statement, such as: ‘Even though I have some of “x” remaining, I deeply and completely accept myself.’
eftuniverse.com