

Enduring Effects of EFT – A Stress Inoculation

by Patricia Carrington

Out of deep pain and distress sometimes comes surprising good — not across the board, but little pockets of positive learning can be found even in the kind of shock that we have all undergone since the tragic events of September 11.

I'd like to report on two things I have discovered — one has to do with the cumulative benefits of EFT used repeatedly over time, and the other with the manner in which this crisis can present an opportunity for some people to use EFT to break through emotional barriers that may not have responded to any kind of treatment before — including EFT.

“Lorraine” is the star reporter of a major metropolitan newspaper in the New York area. She is usually assigned to cover major disasters. During this past week her every waking moment was devoted to interviewing the families of those who lost their lives at the World Trade Center, including an in-person interview which she conducted with a man whose wife said goodbye to him on her cell phone just before the crash (you've heard of him).

She had been working with me in therapy for a year and a half during which time we used EFT extensively to help her with a long standing claustrophobia to the point where she can now ride in elevators without panic (although she cannot go into tunnels with ease, especially if she is riding on a train), and she no longer suffers her former panic attacks. She has also made enormous headway in many other aspects of her life over the time of her treatment.

When I was waiting for her to arrive at my office yesterday, I expected to find her deeply shaken because I remembered how she used to obsessively worry for days if she saw even a single stray dog in the street who was homeless, experiencing intense guilt because she could not save all the wounded animals she saw. Many times we tapped for this problem of hers; gradually replacing her guilt with loving concern for the animals she can help, including her own beloved dog and cat. That has been a triumph for her and a great relief.

When she arrived in my office, although she was tired, she was surprisingly composed. As she talked about the events which she had had to deal with when she contacted the people who had suffered the most from this event, I could see that she was “handling” this. She had deep compassion for all who were affected, yet she was not getting into what I call the “lifeguard syndrome,” the danger a lifeguard faces of being pulled under the waves by a drowning person and thereby becoming useless. As I listened to her speak, I couldn't help but remember the frightened and guilt-ridden Lorraine of a year ago. How was this new reaction of hers explained?

She spontaneously gave me the answer. “It's amazing.” she said, “But I'm handling it. I'm able to work with the people who've been affected and take the constant bombardment of information in that newsroom and not have it blast me and create awful guilt. I can help by writing their stories as well as I can so the world out there will understand, but that's it.”

Then she added that she thought the reason she could do this was because of all the tapping we had done on her issues of fear and guilt over the course of her therapy. “I really think it's the tapping that's done it.” She said. Then she told me that she hadn't even had to tap for this specific event, she was just able to put her shoulder to the wheel and keep working.

This tells us something important about EFT and its effects over time. When working with Lorraine, over and over again the trees in her emotional “forest” had been cut down as we worked on them, and many surrounding trees had fallen as a result — and then later in the face of a major disaster she is finding herself unexpectedly able to handle it in a way that is entirely uncharacteristic of the Lorraine of the past.

This reminds me of another incident that was reported to me only last month by a man who had been using EFT regularly for about six months for “just about everything”. An acquaintance of his was recently sought by the state police for questioning, and he unexpectedly had his own house searched by them although he was entirely innocent of any involvement in the suspected crime. He ended up being interrogated at the local precinct, and he described to me his ease and graciousness to the officers who searched and questioned him, and then said. “I’ve been trying to figure out why I was so calm and at ease with this whole thing, and I decided it can only be one thing — it must be the many times I’ve used the phrase “I deeply and completely accept myself” when I’m doing the EFT. I think it’s had some kind of permanent effect on me, so when they were suspicious of me I just automatically accepted myself.”

Looking at these two stories I can see a whole new dimension to our EFT work — that of changing, over time, deep seated attitudes and beliefs by the sheer repetition of the EFT process. In a sense, these two people received “stress inoculation” from repeated EFT, so that when tough challenges came to them unexpectedly, they were surprisingly ready to meet them. This is obviously a highly desirable outcome.

On another level, also very instructive, Lorraine demonstrated the manner in which a catastrophe can provide an opportunity to deal with something using EFT that may have resisted all former treatments. She told me that although she was able to handle the devastating events in a calm, constructive manner, that there was one personal side effect of this incident which was troubling her. Her claustrophobia (which essentially has been a fear of being “trapped”) had returned in an exaggerated fashion as she imagined the people who had been trapped in the building, and particularly as she thought of the possibility that people may have been trapped in the train in the tunnel under the Hudson, as the water crept up. She experienced fear when thinking of herself being in a similar situation, although this had not interfered with her work.

When we prepared to use EFT on this, the first part of her set-up phrase seemed obvious, “Even though I feel terrified and overwhelmed by that scene...”, but after that she was unable to think of any antidote to that fear. Although she was familiar with using Choices in the set-up phrase (a method which I frequently use, see The Choices Method) she could not think of any attitude that could possibly counteract this reaction.

As we talked about the devastating sense of entrapment felt by those who could find no escape from the disaster, I helped her reframe the entire incident before we began to tap. I hoped to have her see it from a perspective that would allow healing. So I headed right into the eye of the storm, as it were, and addressed her fear of annihilation.

I did this realizing that there was no way it can be outwardly acceptable for anyone to be trapped in a disaster with no escape possible. To be sure, we were seeing her old fears of entrapment reactivated, but there were also fears of a realistic danger that could conceivably face us all in the future. These are point-of-no-escape situations, and while for some people in some circumstances the knowledge that “I am safe NOW” may suffice (as it often does for a childhood traumatic memory that no longer applies, or may for a child who feels safety no

matter what as long as its parent is present) it is not certain that any of us are really THAT safe now. There are no guarantees that we can offer to our clients (or ourselves) that this kind of terrible thing will not happen again.

So I shared with her my point of view — that life being what it is, we are never really as safe as we like to think we are at any time. Life is a fragile balance at best (although we don't think about this much) and just a few degrees of internal heating-up can destroy us — and a meteor hurtling through our atmosphere (and this too could happen) would blot us out in an instant. In a sense, we keep living from moment to moment only by the grace of God.

Since there are no guarantees of safety that we can honestly give to intelligent adults in this present situation, no magic that can make it go away and never come back, we can only point out relative degrees of safety. I think this is one of the reasons that this incident causes such deep confusion. It makes us painfully aware of our vulnerability and a danger that is in fact on our doorstep. To pretend otherwise is to avoid the issue and can actually make us be less effective in our efforts to help. Those who are ready to and actually need to confront this truth and go beyond it will need to be helped to do so using EFT.

I chose to help Lorraine confront the absolute worst and accept it fully and with peace in her heart. From this lowest possible point I felt we might be able to build. I did this to address her present exaggeration of symptoms, but I didn't expect the result which was a breakthrough for her lifelong fear of entrapment.

Lorraine accepted the word “annihilation” with relief, it clearly expressed what she was feeling, however she was very familiar with EFT and received great benefit from it over a long period of time — I would not ordinarily suggest such a direct approach for people who have never worked with the method or whom we do not know — although sometimes it might be the best thing for them too, this would be a matter for careful clinical assessment.

I reframed Lorraine's feared situation by telling her about Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who had lived in Holland at the time of the holocaust. Etty left behind her (she eventually died in Auschwitz) one of the most extraordinary accounts of the triumph of the human spirit under unspeakable circumstances ever told. I described Etty, initially a talented young woman with no spiritual or religious background at all who in the beginning of her diaries was living a rather self-absorbed life style, but who during the days of increasing Nazi terror gradually began to sense an extraordinary Presence within her which allowed her often to feel “cradled in the arms of God.”

As the darkness descended over the world, by contrast she found herself experiencing an increasing sense of beauty in life, in people, and in helping others. The growth of an inner sense of protection, and the flowering of love within her in direct proportion to the encroaching horror of outside events, is in many ways the ultimate example of our ability to choose the manner in which we will experience ANYTHING. (Note” The book containing Etty's moving diaries is entitled “An Interrupted Life”).

Lorraine is not religious but is open to spiritual values, and she visibly changed when I described Etty. When I asked, “Is there a Choice you can think of that would allow you to have this sense of protection in the face of a disaster?” she was now able to think of one. It was, “I choose inner freedom and peace.” To her this simple phrase represented perfectly the inner light we had been talking about.

So, Lorraine did a round of EFT using the Choices Trio — a method I describe elsewhere and her set-up statement was, “Even though I feel terrified and overwhelmed by that scene, I choose inner freedom and peace.” She ended the complete round of EFT with incredible relief and said excitedly, “I can almost picture myself trapped and feeling that – that “Thing” around me, all around me and it makes all the difference!” Lorraine, an ordinarily articulate person, could only wave her hands and call the quiet protection she sensed “that Thing,” but we both knew what she meant.

She still needed to do one more round because she was not yet down to a 0 in her distress rating, and since the phrase “terrified and overwhelmed” was no longer appropriate because she was no longer feeling that way, she now used the words, “Even though I don’t want to feel trapped, I choose to feel inner freedom and peace.”

This completed the work. She left at the end of the hour with a look of amazement on her face. “This is a sudden major breakthrough for my claustrophobia,” she said “ it’s the breakthrough we could never get.” And she added; “Now I see that, in any and every situation possible — NONE of that matters.” She was referring, of course, to outer circumstances.

Since that session her claustrophobia has been strikingly less. While it is not totally gone she tells me that her symptoms are better now than they have ever been in the entire time we’ve worked together.

This can be a time of transformation for those who can take advantage of the growth inherent in suffering — and EFT can be a superb help in effecting that change.