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Alternative approach Healing Touch

- A local therapist uses a unique method to help soldiers deal with post traumatic stress disorder.

By Jennifer Calhoun

Staff writer

A 4-inch stack of medical records held together by a file folder sits on his kitchen table.

Each piece of paper details a visit to the emergency room, and each one shows the same problem — rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath. Panic.

The man, who asked that his name not be used, is a lieutenant colonel stationed at Fort Bragg in the Army's special operations.

After 7 years of suffering from panic attacks he believes were caused by post-traumatic stress disorder, the soldier said, he's been cured by an alternative therapy called the emotional freedom technique.

The technique was taught and administered to him by local therapist Susan Hannibal.

Emotional freedom technique, which is borne out of the alternative health care field of energy psychology, is billed as a kind of needle-free acupuncture. It combines aspects of Western psychology and Eastern methodology.

The technique is considered scientifically unproven by mainstream measures, but Hannibal said she believes it can cure most cases of PTSD in a short time without medicine or months of psychotherapy.

In the summer of 2000, the lieutenant colonel said, he watched a Humvee roll over and crush a man to death during a training exercise.

At first, he pushed the grisly image to the back of his mind, hoping to keep it away for good.

But soon after, he began to notice other problems: A loud noise, a plane ride or a simple change in routine would throw him into a panic.

"It got to where I had to map out a route to work," he said. "I had to make sure there was a hospital or a fire department somewhere nearby."

He lived in fear of the attacks, terrified he would be exposed and lose the high-security clearance that would cost him his job.

Anti-depressants and self-help CDs offered some relief, but the panic attacks continued.

During the years he suffered from the attacks, he was sent on two short deployments. Anti-depressants, inhalers and techniques gleaned from the self-help CDs helped him cope — but just barely.

"I had my medicine bag with me at all times," he said.

He came close to having an attack on an aircraft back from a deployment, but he was able to keep it at bay, he said.

"It wasn't easy," he said. "I had to talk myself out of it."

Since using the emotional freedom technique, the soldier said, his visits to the emergency room have stopped. Plane rides are no longer a problem, and he can drive anywhere he wants without mapping out emergency service providers in advance.

But some scientists are wary of the technique, primarily because no rigorous, systematic studies have been done, said Dr.

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Farris Tuma of the National Institute of Mental Health's traumatic stress disorders research program.

It's also a little strange to Western eyes.

During therapy sessions, clients talk about their traumatic experience while tapping their fingertips on various energy meridian points on the body, like the top of the head and the point just below the nose. The tapping sends signals to the brain that can reduce the effects of traumatic memories, Hannibal said.

The result for the lieutenant colonel is that he is able to think about the traumatic event but no longer feels the stress and fear the memory once triggered, he said.

Emotional freedom technique has been around since the mid-1990s. It was created by Gary Craig, a minister with the Universal Church of God in Southern California, according to Craig's Web site. It has been used to treat PTSD, anxiety, phobias, eating disorders and other problems.

At least three psychology journals published studies of the technique between 2003 and 2005. Two of the studies noted positive results, but another said that the effectiveness of the technique was probably because of factors that stem from more traditional therapies.

Last year, the number of troops diagnosed with PTSD rose by about 50 percent, and suicides reached a record high of 115, according to Army statistics.

Hannibal said she believes those figures could be reduced if the military would allow energy psychology techniques to be practiced on soldiers suffering from PTSD.

According to Hannibal, only two therapists are using the technique in Veterans Affairs hospitals around the country.

Lynn Garland, a licensed clinical social worker at the VA Hospital in Worcester, Mass., is one of them.

Garland said she sometimes uses emotional freedom technique in conjunction with more traditional therapies.

And while the VA doesn't officially endorse emotional freedom technique therapy, Garland said the VA is not rigid about letting therapists use it either.

"They allow therapists to do whatever treatments therapists want to do and think are best," she said. "PTSD is such a complex problem. No one approach or technique can be used."

But Hannibal said she believes she is facing resistance from the Army. She asked Womack Army Medical Center officials if she could conduct a study of the treatment using soldiers suffering from PTSD.

A Womack public affairs officer said Hannibal was referred to the U.S. Army Medical Command and the Department of the Army to get approval for the study.

Hannibal said she dropped the request because she didn't want to go through what she believed would be a bureaucratic roundabout.

"There's too much resistance," she said. "They're not ready."

Hannibal said energy psychology studies have been largely rejected by many mainstream psychiatrists.

The main problem, as Hannibal sees it, is that psychiatrists and some psychological professionals want to keep the treatment out of reach because it's a threat to their professions.

The treatment does not use drugs, works quickly and can be self-applied by patients, she said. It can also be administered without a license, which might threaten providers in the mainstream mental health fields.

"This works and doesn't cause harm, so let's try it," Hannibal said. "What can't they see? Somebody has to make a decision here to allow something without 20 years' experience. We don't have the time."

Dr. Elana Newman, associate professor and director of the University of Tulsa's clinical department of psychology, said some alternative treatments are considered controversial because some practitioners believe therapists should use proven, validated treatments.

Others, however, are willing to give it a try, Newman said.

The anonymous soldier is one of those people.

After trying it as a last resort, he believes energy psychology techniques may have saved his life.

Now, he said, he's trying — mostly unsuccessfully — to get other soldiers to give it a try.

For Hannibal, giving it a try is all she can hope for.

"I'm not saying that every suicide can be stopped," she said. "But a lot could be."

Staff writer Jennifer Calhoun can be reached at calhounj@fayobserver.com or 486-3595.

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