

Academic Paper

The 'Energy Therapy Technique' arising from Irish Celtic Shamanism, Enabling spiritual expression in the counselling/psychotherapeutic relationship

By Dr Karen Ward MIACP



focus on the evolution of counselling, psychotherapy and spirituality and energy therapies, specifically shamanism. The second will explore the evidence-based component parts of the Energy Therapy Technique. The final section offers salient quotes from my doctoral research study from both clients and therapists who have found this holistic addition to their clinical sessions helpful. The conclusion will summarise the findings of this unique and original work within the biopsychospiritual field in an Irish context.

Counselling, psychotherapy and spirituality

Modern counselling and psychotherapy have reaped the rewards of Carl Rogers' (1942) huge emphasis on empiricism and many new approaches have emerged that marry the theoretical with the experiential. The development of a new therapy takes key stages: the study and practice of a seminal training method, different theories emerging with experience, research and further study (Cooper and Dryden, 2015). The advent of continuous professional development and regular course attendance assimilates contemporary ways of working. It is with the introduction of new techniques and research, that the evolution of counselling and psychotherapy continues today.

Since the 1960s there has been an increase of interest in what could be termed the secular sacred – spiritual

Shamanic energetic/spiritual techniques increasingly are married with humanistic approaches to counselling and psychotherapy that empower the client further in the therapeutic alliance. This research provides new theoretical and practical insights in an Irish context using an original technique as a safe, practical and robust transformational agent.

Introduction

Within the field of counselling and psychotherapy there has frequently been some issue with addressing personal spirituality. Some approaches, for example Psychosynthesis, do focus on spirituality, though in the mainstream there have been limitations on how it can be approached (Cooper & McLeod 2011; Steere 2019). Counsellors and psychotherapists

who are aware of this trend, are conscious of addressing this issue seeking ways of working with their clients that are safe and effective. This article charts the development of a new energetic/spiritual tool, the Energy Therapy Technique, utilised in my academic doctorate research, that enables therapists to offer their clients an inclusive way to tap colloquial into their spiritual beliefs.

The first section of this article will

practices that are not linked to specific religions but which focus on personal empowerment (Cosgrove et al, 2011). According to Mackinnon (2012, p.13-14), "This 'psycho-spiritual' movement is developing parallel to and is enforced by scientific discoveries, mainly in quantum physics."

However, discussing religion/spirituality is a field in which even experienced counsellors/psychotherapists frequently find themselves unprepared or confused. Verbeck et al. (2015, p.104) contend that "four factors may underlie the failure to discuss religion/spirituality in counsellors' client sessions:

- 'religion/spirituality is not a factor in their [counsellors] own lives and therefore not relevant to the sessions (Plante, 2007);
- they feel that they are poorly trained (Miller and Bright, 2010);
- they may struggle with ethical issues believing that religious/spiritual inclusion is beyond their remit (Rosenfield, 2010).
- they may wish to avoid personal disclosure re their own belief system (Gregory et al. 2008)."

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) currently offers its membership 7 additional subsets including 'BACP Spirituality' while the American Counseling Association (ACA) has 18 divisions including the 'Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values', both with their own peer reviewed journals. IACP do not have specific subsets/divisions yet, however, currently 1277 members cite 'spirituality' as part of the therapeutic services offered on their website listing.

Counsellors' perspectives of spirituality

A key theme to emerge in my

research was the paucity of language to describe spirituality and the inherent dilemma of initiating this topic with clients. An inhibiting factor in the verbalisation of spirituality related to the perceived lack of communication skills required when attempting to converse about the indefinable. This perception of the tentativeness around the spiritual topic was observed by counsellors, psychotherapists and their clients (Rosmarin et al. 2013). It may be concluded that ascertaining if the client holds any beliefs at the entrance interview stage would facilitate knowing if their counsellor was open to its inclusion in their work together (Hathaway, Scott and Garver, 2004). Death, dying and the 'afterlife' were popular themes which naturally instigated the subject. Many come to counselling and psychotherapy to ponder the great meanings of life and inevitably this broaches these concepts with reference to belief systems and spirituality.

Spirituality in a contemporary Irish context

In Irish culture today there seems to be a distinctive loss of basic values and traditions that previously sustained a sense of thorough grounding in who and what we are as a people. The resultant loss of security and sense of anchoring in turbulent times may have led to the manifestation of a plethora of physical, mental and energetic illnesses (Ingeman, 2010; Ward, 2013). This is particularly evident today, with the rise in holistic centres and mindfulness practices signalling that many Irish people have left their former religious practice for a variety of reasons and are yearning for connection and an aspect of religiosity and spirituality in their lives (Cosgrove et al., 2011). Irish people are increasingly choosing, of their own volition, a variety of spiritual tools either privately or

with practitioners. Counsellors and psychotherapists, similar to other health professionals, have been seeking to incorporate these into clinical sessions, so that clients may combine both if seeking this approach. This endeavour requires careful and considered handling to ensure maximum success (Stewart, Moodley and Hyatt, 2017).

Counselling, psychotherapy and shamanism

One of the emerging paradigms in the integration of the spiritual is that of shamanism and related energy therapies (Kuhling, 2011). Shamanism, an ancient tradition, is the name given to holistic healing with particular emphasis on the spiritual. It is a nature-based wisdom tradition, not a religion and has no dogma (Meier et al., 2005). Core principles of shamanic energy therapy are founded upon the view that the human body has a life force or energy that permeates the physical, mental and emotional aspects of the body from birth to death. This energy (referred to as Prana, Chi or Ki in Eastern countries) is anchored in the nervous system of the physical body in seven key areas often referred to as 'chakras' - the Indian Sanskrit word meaning 'wheel of light' (Maret, 2009). As with Eastern philosophies and corresponding with worldwide indigenous practises, Irish Celtic Shamanism concurs with the premise that energy is a 'currency' of spirituality (Cantwell, 2007).

A key tenet of energy therapy from a shamanic perspective is the principle that all illness and disease begin first at the energetic (spiritual) level and percolates from there to bring imbalance to the psycho-emotional and physical levels (Villoldo, 2001). If blockages or toxicity are removed and disassociated elements restored at the foundation level of the energetic, then the client's psycho-emotional symptoms are improved from the deepest layer of causality.

This addresses, not only energies underpinning negative patterns that are consciously held by the client, but crucially those held unconsciously too. As a result, the client may be released of the deepest unresolved patterns of ancestral, cultural, familial and relational ill-health, accelerating personal, spiritual and inter-personal growth (Fotiou, 2012).

Psychosynthesis, Gestalt Therapy and Process Orientated Psychotherapy, as well as Jungian therapy and Energy Psychology all offer their clients tools/techniques whose origins borrowed heavily from ancient shamanic and esoteric philosophies and principally shamanism (Feinstein and Eden, 2008). These include Applied Kinesiology, Tapas Acupressure Technique (TAT), Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), Thought Field Therapy (TFT) and Dynamic Energetic Healing.

US anthropologist Michael Harner (1990) brought distilled ancient shamanic techniques into contemporary usage as 'core shamanism' and combined this with standard counselling methodologies to coin what he referred to as 'shamanic counselling'. Cuban/American psychologist and medical anthropologist Alberto Villoldo (2001) also spearheaded the use of shamanic energy therapies in a modern context comprising extraction (removing toxicity and energetic blockages), soul retrieval (restoring dissociated elements) psychopomp (death and complicated grief) and auric cleansing work.

Shamanism in a contemporary Irish context

Shamanism, when practiced from a Celtic spiritual perspective, has key elements that correspond with worldwide shamanic practices, yet has a distinctive aspect denoting the cultural and traditional context that both attracts and seems to suit the Irish psyche.

Shamanism, when practiced from a Celtic spiritual perspective, has key elements that correspond with worldwide shamanic practices

This combined approach, charted below, illustrates that a person, often with no previous holistic or shamanic training, can with intent, be safely and fluently assisted to find healing resources from a non-ordinary reality (altered state of consciousness) by tapping into their innate sense of spirituality.

The Energy Therapy Technique - a new secular spiritual tool based in Celtic Shamanism

As a psychotherapist, I experienced the requirement for spiritual tools to safely practice with clients who sought a holistic approach and I felt a frustration at the lack of variety of such techniques especially in an Irish context. Contemporaneously, as a Celtic shamanic therapist I experienced the freedom to discover, test and evolve ancient principles with spiritual help, into a form acceptable to the modern client.

In my psychotherapy core course, which had a holistic approach, spirituality was discussed and tools in the form of breathing and meditation were offered. However, through my shamanic training, I became aware of specific areas of empowering energetic work that would facilitate clients to heal their presenting issues and I began to harness these for their benefit. I recognised that initiating a conversation with clients around spirituality was important but harnessing their personal beliefs to facilitate self-healing was a further possibility if the two genres could be combined within the biopsychospiritual approach.

For the past 17 years I have been practicing as a shamanic

energy therapist, having studied extensively with Alberto Villoldo's Four Winds Society (2003-2008) and Martin Duffy's Irish Centre for Shamanic Studies (2006-2019). When combined with 25 years of psychotherapy and 13 years of supervisory practice, I recognised a unique opportunity to devise a contemporary Celtic shamanic spiritual tool for use within a counselling/psychotherapeutic clinical setting. During this period, I completed a research masters in All Hallows College, DCU, on the subject of Celtic shamanism in the greater Dublin area while concurrently developing a new energetic/spiritual technique. Working with two different supervisors, volunteer colleagues and eventually willing clients, I devised what I called the Energy Therapy Technique (ETT) over a period of 2 years from 2005 - 2007 and honed and refined it over the following 5 years in tandem with supervision and peer review.

Having developed and utilised the technique, I decided to conduct research to discover if it had the espoused potential, thus providing the evidence base from an academic standard. My thesis investigated the meanings of spirituality among accredited counsellors and psychotherapists practicing a new energy therapy technique that brings a spiritual aspect, based on shamanic principles into a clinical session. This encompassed documenting the Energy Therapy Technique in terms of academic literature, training and mentoring 14 accredited counsellors and psychotherapists. Subsequently, I interviewed them to explore their meanings of spirituality, having implemented the technique with selected clients. The findings were disseminated through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology indicating that counsellors' meanings of spirituality developed with major and minor

changes. A new paradigm of trust ushered a palpable divine presence of Spirit into the clinic room, bringing empowered awakening to the counsellors of their own volition. The ability to easily facilitate their clients tapping into their sense of spirituality and self-heal were key components of their developments.

For example; clients, who are holistically aware, often sense that they are holding an energetic blockage. Classic statements relating to these include 'I feel sick to my stomach', 'he broke my heart' and 'I've the weight of the world on my shoulders' that are psychosomatic with no basis in medical terms. This work is facilitated from the counsellor/psychotherapist's perspective through asking their client specific questions and inviting them to sense what needs to be released and/or realigned energetically when in a dreamlike altered state of consciousness. The advantage of the technique is that it may be incorporated smoothly into a counselling/psychotherapeutic session in the same way as breathing or stress management techniques. In working with clients, a majority who are open to holistic ways or have experienced Reiki or Bio-Energy are usually highly receptive while, as with all techniques, it does not suit every client, counsellor or psychotherapist.

This technique has been attractive to clients yearning for healing and connection, whilst respecting their autonomy, all (and no) faiths, genders and ethnicity. It has key elements that correspond with worldwide core shamanic practices, yet has a distinctive Celtic aspect, denoting the cultural and traditional context within which it has been developed (Ward, 2013). The method is straightforward and empowering, founded on the principle that the human being is by nature a self-healing organism.

An ETT session begins with an introduction to energy therapies (nature, the chakra system etc.),

the client's permission, a detailed entrance interview and the setting of a clear intention. Next short yoga-like breathwork is followed by semi-guided visualization where the client, of their own volition, identifies any blockages, understands their origins and the energetic dynamics of same. Facilitated by the counsellor/psychotherapist, the client then has the opportunity to release any blockages - 'remove' the weight off their shoulders, or return any 'missing' aspects of themselves - 'bring back' the sense of self trust they perceived lost, to gain insight for their issue and/or cut any 'unhealthy energetic ties' with anyone living or deceased. The technique protocol finishes with a solid grounding and exit interview while choosing simple ways to integrate the work at home following the session. An anchor stone (Lia Naofa, in Irish Gaelic meaning sacred stone) is chosen to 'ground' the client during the session. The technique takes place with counsellor/psychotherapist seated opposite the client who has their eyes closed thus facilitating a smooth transition from talk therapy to this energy work with no requirement for any equipment or change of positioning.

Therapist and client comments feedback

This final section offers salient quotes from both clients and therapists in my doctoral research study who have found this holistic addition to their clinical sessions helpful. Counsellors/psychotherapists used the ETT after four days' training and mentorship in identifying clients who are open to this type of work of their own volition.

Salient comments from counsellors/psychotherapists in my research:

"The main benefit is restoring the locus of control and power back to the individual."

"It is my belief that shamanism is a key part of the emerging psychotherapy of the future."

"I feel fulfilled, I feel I have really showed up to help these people to move on."

"I probably was hiding the spiritual part because people might think that's a bit whacky."

"I've become a lot more aware. I started to trust my own intuition."

Salient comments from the counsellor/psychotherapists' clients in my research:

"I'm transformed, I'm a different person."

"I couldn't believe it, I have never seen such brightness before... a beautiful session."

"I tapped into a deep part of me that I never knew held me back so much. I am free now."

"This technique we did today opened up something and released old hurt and pain."

Conclusion

Since the 1960s there has been an increase of interest in what could be termed the 'secular sacred' – spiritual practices that are not linked to specific religions but focus on personal empowerment (Cosgrove et al., 2011). Both counselling and psychotherapy have been evolving to integrate the spiritual and to embrace the restoration of the spiritual-healing paradigm as a central honouring of holistic health (Lines, 2006). Following on from the spiritual integrative movements including Psychosynthesis (1930s) and Transpersonal Psychology (1960s), Villolodo, Harner and Ingerman (1990s) have brought major credence to including shamanic based energetic/spiritual techniques within professional healthcare settings. Brockman (2006) and MacKinnon (2012) in particular, in the last two decades, have brought these

techniques to the forefront of the modern counselling establishment.

Every counsellor and psychotherapist in the research articulated that using the shamanic based energetic/spiritual technique developed for the research had a profound effect on their trust, confidence and way of working, leading to a felt experience of rapid, deep shifts by actuating a holistic approach into their client work. These dramatic changes were mirrored by other qualitative studies also using similar metaphysical tools (Rosmarin et al., 2013; Verbeck et al., 2015; White, 2016).

For counselling and psychotherapy to work, the client needs to believe implicitly in the abilities of their therapist so there is a given that in appropriate circumstances new tools in the form of techniques may be introduced *i.e.* stress management mindfulness or anti-panic attack breathing. This new energy technique facilitates clients to energetically release, realign and restore issues decades old but do so from a positionality of empowerment. This compassionate way of working

permitted clients to reach a wide range of issues by accessing their spirituality.

As we have seen, Ireland is changing and when attending counselling or psychotherapy, gradually more and more clients are seeking to explore their issues from a holistic standpoint, importantly including spirituality. The ETT acts as a safe, practical and robust transformational agent. Shamanic energetic/spiritual techniques fit with current humanistic, pluralistic and integrative approaches to counselling and psychotherapy thus honouring the client as the 'adept' in the therapeutic alliance. This research has been deemed a unique and original work within the biopsychospiritual field cultivating new ground within this sphere, thus providing new theoretical and practical insights in an Irish context. ☺

Dr Karen Ward

Dr Karen Ward is an IACP accredited Psychotherapist (2001)

and Supervisor (2009) awarded her Doctorate of Philosophy at DCU (2019). Based in Dublin, Karen teaches the Energy Therapy Technique online twice a year. She and her husband, John Cantwell, founded and run the Slí An Chroí school of Irish Celtic Shamanism. Known previously as the Energy Therapist from the BBC's 'Last Resort' and Holistic Presenter from RTE's 'Health Squad', Karen is author of health books *Change a Little to Change a Lot* and *The Secrets of Ageless Aging*.

Contact Details:

karenwardtherapist@gmail.com
www.drkarenwardtherapist.ie www.slianchroi.ie

Grateful acknowledgement of my PhD Supervisors input: Dr Liam MacGabhann, Associate Professor Mental Health Practice, School of Nursing, Psychotherapy & Community Health, Dublin City University liam.macgabhann@dcu.ie. and Dr Geraldine Moane, Professor Emerita School of Psychology, University College Dublin (ger.moane@ucd.ie)

REFERENCES

- American Counseling Association (ACA) (2017). *Articles and membership page*. Available at <http://www.apa.org/articles/index.aspx>
- British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (2017). *Spirituality division page*. Available at <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-divisions/bacp-spirituality/>
- Brockman, H. (2006). *Dynamic energetic healing: Integrating core shamanic practices with energy psychology applications and processwork principles*. Columba Press.
- Cantwell, J. (2007). *Healers spiral*. Available at: <http://www.slianchroi.ie/heal.htm>
- Cooper, M. and Dryden, W. (2015). *The handbook of pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*. Sage.
- Cooper, M. and McLeod, J. (2011). *Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy*. Sage.
- Cosgrove, O., Cox, L., Kuhling, C., & Mulholland P. (Eds.) (2011). *Ireland's new religious movements*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Feinstein, D. (2008) 'Energy psychology: A review of the preliminary evidence.'. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45(2).
- Fotiou, E. (2012) 'Working with "la medicina": elements of healing in contemporary ayahuasca rituals'. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 23(1).
- Hamer, M. J. (1990). *The way of the shaman*. Harper & Row.
- Hathaway, W.L., Scott, S.Y. and Garver, S.A. (2004) 'Assessing religious/spiritual functioning: A neglected domain in clinical practice?'. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1).
- Heelas, P. (2007). 'The Holistic Milieu and Spirituality: Reflections on Voas and Bruce', Flanagan, K. and Jupp, P. (Eds.) *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Ashgate.
- IACP (2017). *Members Area*. Available at: <https://iacp.ie/>
- Ingeman, S. (2010). *Awakening to the spirit world: the shamanic path of direct revelation*. ReadHowYouWant.com.
- Kuhling, C. (2011). New age re-enchantment in post-Celtic tiger Ireland. In: Cosgrove, O., Cox, L., Kuhling, C. and Mulholland, P. (Eds.) *Ireland's new religious movements*. Cambridge Scholars.
- Lines, D. (2006). *Spirituality in counselling and psychotherapy*. SAGE.
- Long, A. (2010). Spirituality in counselling. *Éisteach*, 10(1) 27-29.
- MacKinnon, C. (2012). *Shamanism and spirituality in therapeutic practice: An introduction*. Singing Dragon.
- Maret, K. and Eng, M. (2009). *Energy medicine in the United States: historical roots and the current status*. Foundation for Alternative and Integrative Medicine.
- Mastropieri, B., Schussel, L., Forbes, D. and Miller, L. (2015). Inner resources for survival: Integrating interpersonal psychotherapy with spiritual visualization with homeless youth. *Journal of religion and health* 54(3), 903-921.
- Meier, A., St. James O'Connor, T., and Van Katwyk, P. L. (Eds.) (2005). *Spirituality & health: multidisciplinary explorations*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Rogers, C. R. (1942). *Counselling and psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin Boston.
- Rosmarin, D.H., Pirutinsky, S., Green, D. and McKay, D. (2013). Attitudes toward spirituality/religion among members of the association for behavioral and cognitive therapies. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice* 44(6), pp. 424-433 doi: 10.1037/a0035218
- Steere, D. A. (2019). *Spiritual presence in psychotherapy – a guide for caregivers*. Routledge.
- Stewart, S.L., Moodley, R. and Hyatt, A. eds. (2017). *Indigenous cultures and mental health counselling: four directions for integration with counselling psychology*. Routledge.
- Verbeck, E. G., Arzoumanian, M. A., Estrellado, J. E., DeLome, J., Dahlin, K., Hennrich, E., Rodríguez, H. E., Stevens, J. M. and Dalenberg, C. (2015). Religion, spirituality, and the working alliance with trauma survivors. In Walker, D.F., Courtois, C. A., Sten, J. D., Walker, D. F., Courtois, C. A., and Aten, J. S. (eds). American Psychological Association.
- Villolodo, A. (2001). *Shaman, healer, sage*. Bantam Books.
- Ward, K. (2013). *Transpersonal spiritual healing: a study of the philosophies of shamanic energy healing master shamanic practitioners in Dublin* [Masters' Thesis]. All Hallows College, Dublin City University.
- Ward, K. (2019). *An investigation into how the meanings of spirituality develop among accredited counsellors when practicing a new shamanic energy therapy technique* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Dublin City University.