

Physical Symptoms as a Protective Mechanism

by Helen P. Bressler RN, BSc, EFT Cert I

It is no surprise that physical symptoms can be caused, maintained or exacerbated by emotional state. It is also no surprise that EFT practitioners often have great success using tapping to reduce or eliminate emotional issues or state, and thus alleviate the physical symptom. As practitioners we have addressed the symptom directly, followed it as it travels around the body, and assessed its unique values; in addition to identifying and addressing the core issues which underlie the symptom or make it worse.

However, another concept has come to my attention over the past few years: that of the symptom as a protective mechanism. To reiterate, EFT practitioners often either seek out and address the root cause of an issue which then alleviates a physical symptom, or they address the symptom directly. But what if that symptom is there as a protective mechanism? Then how does that make the symptom different to any other physical issue, and what can be done about it?

If we are to consider the symptom in EFT terms we see it as having an organic [medical] or emotional cause. An organic symptom can be reduced by EFT, as can the emotional responses to that symptom. Sometimes an organic symptom is completely relieved, although as practitioners it is *always* advisable to get your client to follow up with their medical practitioner. In fact, as EFT practitioners we *must* demonstrate due diligence and adhere to such ethically sound standards.

On the other hand, with a symptom that has an emotional cause we aim to address the emotional cause directly or via the symptom itself, as stated in an earlier paragraph. And yet, an emotional cause can present challenges which we, as certified, experienced practitioners deal with on a daily basis by following cues that result from skilled communication with our client. A symptom that has an emotional cause often changes in its expression, the intensity goes down, a quality changes, it travels from one area to another. The emotions may be expressed directly and they too change qualities, decrease intensity and switch aspects as the emotion is being cleared out and resolved.

But a protective mechanism holds tight; it is after all there to protect and is unwilling to express itself, or present itself to be healed. An inexperienced practitioner might attempt to tap on its qualities or intensity, all to no avail. There may also be an attempt to identify core issues without success. This may lead to frustration in the practitioner and feelings of frustration, disappointment and lack of trust in the client. A protective mechanism does not want to be healed, addressed or reduced. It may also appear to get worse when you do try

to address it. *'I'll show you'* it seems to say. Symptoms that have an emotional or organic cause want to be healed. The natural state is to be in balance, the body wants to be well. Protective mechanisms do not want to be disturbed; they provide their own sense of homeostasis. This is the difference.

The first thing to do is to notice such symptoms, and not to be alarmed. The second thing is to work with the client on any, more surface issues to clear the way for working on the protective mechanism. The next part of the process and most important is to *ensure you are working within your scope of practice*. You may be, and likely are, uncovering a deep emotional pain or trauma that does not want to surface. Are you well equipped professionally for this? If not, stop and refer to a more experienced, more suitable professional.

So you are a well equipped, seasoned professional, now what? Start by asking about the symptom itself. Externalizing it can be a good strategy, that way it becomes less threatening. How long have they had the symptom? When does it get worse? What exacerbates it? Does the symptom change or is it always the same? What strategies have they tried to relieve themselves of it? Has anything worked, and if so for how long? By asking these questions the practitioner learns about the symptom's character and may glean some clues to the role it takes in protecting the client. I've often found that a symptom has been around for a long time, perhaps since childhood although it may have morphed slightly. Asking what others thought about the symptom may also give some clues as to its purpose.

It is not unusual for the client to have little idea that their symptom is a protective mechanism, hence the practitioner's skill in suspecting such. It is also not unusual for the client to begin expressing their fear or dread once the practitioner has worked to take the 'edge' off the symptom. At this point, stop, deal with the fear/dread until the client is open and willing to go further. It might be that this takes several sessions. Work with the client, be gentle; take a circular route at this juncture. You are addressing a protective mechanism that has provided a good defense for years or even decades. Once the client is willing and able to move on, do several rounds thanking the protective mechanism for being there and for doing such a good job; then tell it that it is no longer required and remind the client that they are an adult now and more able to deal with the underlying issue/pain. Do not omit these rounds. They are worth their weight in gold! Often a cognitive shift occurs within these rounds and exponential moves forward follow.

Hopefully at this stage the client is more able to see the purpose of their symptom and is able to tap on the underlying issues. Conversely, it has been my experience that gaining clarity about the protective mechanism's existence and purpose is empowering in itself and is often all that is required. When something is seen for what it is and is viewed with the eyes of an adult, rather than through the eyes of a distraught child, its

intensity simply begins to wane. This might be a good place to end one session to be picked up at the beginning of the next; when underlying experiences and issues can then be addressed without the barrier of the protective mechanism getting in the way. Because at this point, the body, mind and emotions are on par with regular symptoms in that they express themselves *because* they are ready for healing, rather than avoiding it.

With peace,

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