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# Thought Field Therapy: A Former Insider's Experience

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*Thought Field Therapy (TFT) is a novel therapy that employs finger tapping on purported acupressure points. Over the past decade, TFT, promoted on the Internet and through testimonials of fast cures, has gained popularity with therapists, including clinical social workers. Although TFT claims to cure a wide variety of psychological and physical problems, there is scant evidence to support such claims. The following is an account of my 7-year experience as a leading practitioner, author, and teacher of TFT and includes my initial skepticism, what first interested me, my experiences training to the highest level of TFT (the proprietary Voice Technology) and becoming part of the inner circle of TFT, an experiment I did with Voice Technology, and factors that led to my doubts and ultimate disillusionment with TFT. The pseudoscientific aspects of TFT and how they can impair critical thinking are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Thought Field Therapy; novel therapies; pseudoscience; critical thinking; evidence-based practice; mental health; anxiety disorders*

## OVERVIEW OF THOUGHT FIELD THERAPY

Thought Field Therapy (TFT), originally marketed as Callahan Techniques, is a novel therapeutic approach developed by psychologist Roger Callahan that employs finger tapping on purported specified acupressure meridian points on the body while focusing one's attention on a psychological problem or physical symptoms. Since there have been many generic offshoots of TFT, Callahan refers to his original TFT as Callahan Techniques, TFT, or CT-TFT. Although TFT is perhaps best known for its putative fast phobia cure (R. J. Callahan, 1985), Callahan and other TFT proponents claim that TFT is effective for a wide variety of conditions such as phobias, panic, generalized anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, jet lag, and many other psychological and physical problems (R. J. Callahan & Trubo, 2001). More recently, members of the Association for Thought Field Therapy's (ATFT's) trauma relief committee have been traveling to foreign countries such as Africa (J. Callahan, 2004, 2005). They claim to have successfully treated physical conditions such as malaria and

have also worked with victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Spiegel, 2006). Callahan has also made anecdotal claims that TFT raised t-cell counts in an AIDS patient, has successfully eliminated flu symptoms, and has brought about unprecedented changes in the physiological measure heart rate variability (R. J. Callahan, 2005).

The theory behind TFT is that when a person is focused on a particular problem they are attuned to a "thought field" containing bioenergetic units called *perturbations* (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000; R. J. Callahan & Trubo, 2001). It is believed that these perturbations are the underlying causes of all emotional disturbances and that each perturbation corresponds to a specific meridian point on the body. Callahan further claims that to produce a cure these points must be tapped in a specified sequence. TFT offers algorithms of prescribed tapping sequences for specific conditions, which are taught in the beginning-level TFT courses. The more advanced TFT courses offer an assessment technique called Causal Diagnosis, wherein individualized treatment sequences can be obtained for those who do not respond to algorithms or who have a condition for which no algorithm exists. The midlevel training is called TFT Diagnosis, which teaches an assessment technique that needs to be administered in the presence of the person being treated. The most advanced level is called Voice Technology, which offers a causal diagnostic technique that is carried out over the telephone and claimed to have a 97 to 98% success rate. Voice Technology training costs \$100,000 and trainees must sign a confidentiality agreement not to reveal its trade secret.

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## LACK OF EVIDENCE FOR TFT'S CLAIMS

There is scant evidence to support TFT's claims. Most of the evidence adduced in support of TFT consists of clinical anecdotes. The only published peer-reviewed study (Carbonell & Figley, 1999) in TFT's favor was an exploratory study on four novel therapeutic approaches, which the authors clearly noted was not designed to test efficacy or to serve as a comparison study. Gaudiano & Herbert (2000) published a critique of TFT, noting its widespread promotion on the Internet, the lack of evidence to support its claims, and its pseudoscientific characteristics. The four non-peer-reviewed "studies" adduced by Callahan to support his claim for a 97 to 98% success rate with Voice Technology (R. J. Callahan & Trubo, 2001) were two studies consisting of public demonstrations from radio show call-ins (as reported by R. J. Callahan, 1995, and Leonoff, 1996) and two uncontrolled studies wherein data was collected from TFT algorithm trainings where Voice Technology demonstrations were conducted (Daniel, 1998; Pignotti, as reported in R. J. Callahan & Trubo, 2001). There are also five uncontrolled studies with methodological problems that, according to reviews, render their data uninterpretable (Herbert & Gaudiano, 2001; McNally, 2001). These reports appeared in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* without peer review under special circumstances that I shall describe later. Based on the results of such uncontrolled case reports, Callahan claimed,

As I have made more discoveries over the last two decades, my success rate has been gradually increasing and getting very close to perfection. This work is now on a par with hard science, physics and chemistry. We are no longer floundering in the wispy world of social science. (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000, p. 164)

## MY BACKGROUND IN TFT

For the record, here are some facts about my 7-year involvement in TFT.

- I was the fifth person ever to be trained at the most advanced level of TFT, known as Voice Technology, and the first with social work credentials ever to do so.
- I coauthored one of the studies published on TFT in a special non-peer-reviewed issue of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, which article I later retracted (Beutler, 2001; Pignotti & Steinberg, 2001; Pignotti, 2005a, 2005b).
- On numerous occasions when Roger Callahan was unavailable to take calls from his own clients, for 6 years I was the person to whom he most often referred his clients.
- As of January 2004, I was the only person in the United States Callahan had ever allowed to teach an approved training of his midlevel TFT Diagnostics Step B course

without himself or his wife, Joanne, being directly involved in the training.

- I wrote and put together much of the material for the TFT beginning-level training manuals; coauthored a book chapter with Roger Callahan (R. J. Callahan & Pignotti, 2001); gave him extensive assistance in editing, doing library research, and putting together material for books and articles (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000; R. J. Callahan, 2001a, 2001b); and published an article and book chapter on TFT and cults (Pignotti, 2000, 2002).
- Although Callahan was reluctant to approve of anyone else producing new variations on his treatments, a variation I came up with was the only one thus far (as of January 2004) that he had deemed acceptable and incorporated into his teaching of TFT.

In this article I describe my journey as a TFT therapist and teacher, including my initial skepticism, how I became convinced to the point where I was a highly enthusiastic proponent of TFT, what it was like to be an insider and leader in the TFT community, and how I regained my skepticism and came to change my mind.

## HOW I WAS INTRODUCED TO TFT

I was first introduced to TFT in November 1996, on an electronic mailing list sponsored by the *Family Therapy Networker* magazine. Earlier that year, I had received my Masters degree in Social Work (MSW) from Fordham University and had just accepted a position as a research program coordinator at a major hospital in New York City. I was also working as a clinician, doing interventions with families who had loved ones involved in destructive cults, work I had been doing for several years prior to getting my MSW. Through this line of work, I was in contact with clients who, after leaving cults, suffered from depression, anxiety, and the aftereffects of trauma, so I was very interested in looking for effective ways to help alleviate their suffering especially if the more conventional methods had failed to help them. One of the therapists on the electronic mailing list wrote a highly enthusiastic posting on the benefits of a new therapy, TFT, claiming that it was based on science but offering no evidence. This sounded too good to be true, and given my background and training in research I was highly skeptical and quite harsh in my evaluation. The first words I wrote in response to TFT supporters on the electronic mailing list were as follows:

I am always suspicious when a therapy claims to be based on a "science." . . . When this kind of claim is made, then the burden of proof is on the person making the claim. I don't know of any evidence whatsoever that tapping specific spots on the body will release blocked energy and cure people of traumas forever. Over the years, I have seen too many people who are the

victims of fraud in this business. It is one thing to be using an experimental technique and to inform your clients that you are doing so, but to claim that something is scientific (or “based on science” which is even more vague and misleading) and will cure the client when there is no evidence to support this is out and out fraud. (Pignotti, 1996a)

Eventually in the course of the debate and discussion that ensued on TFT, someone forwarded a lengthy posting by Callahan in which he stated in his concluding paragraph,

I am proud to be among those in science who have been able to offer a choice to humanity; for keep in mind before discoveries such as this, there was no choice—people simply had to go suffering whether or not it was deemed to be desirable [sic] by some. (R. J. Callahan, 1996)

My response was,

Science? If you are claiming to be scientific here, then please present your scientific evidence. . . . If you are going to make claims that your method is scientific, then I hold you to the standards of science. Conduct and publish a study that proves that your method works. (Pignotti, 1996b)

Although after getting to know Callahan I formed the opinion (which I still hold) that he is sincere in his beliefs about TFT, my initial impression was that I was dealing with a person who was either a con artist, severely deluded, or perhaps both. A highly acrimonious dialogue ensued. Callahan had responded to me,

Please understand that I never have been aware of your questions; and with the snotty attitude you gratuitously display I would like to keep it that way. Also, do not bother to develop an interest in TFT; we are not just interested in anybody but are selective. (R. J. Callahan, 1996)

In turn, I responded,

From your response to me, it is obvious that you are, indeed, selective. You are only interested in fawning sycophants and not anyone who bothers to think independently and to raise perfectly legitimate questions. Instead of addressing my points and providing documentation, you choose instead to attack me. I can only conclude that you have no documentation for your claims and so must resort to ad hominem attacks. (Pignotti, 1996b)

To electronic mailing list members, I also wrote,

Callahan is being presented as a great innovator here. From what he posted here, however, I just don't see it. His story is full of holes. He makes a huge leap from claiming he cured one person, to talking about the “facts” of TFT. He repeatedly uses the phrase “facts of TFT” but I have yet to see one fact presented. Perhaps he found himself a pariah, not because he

is a great persecuted innovator but because what he is claiming just does not hold water. The review committee for his papers must have seen the same flaws in his arguments that I did. (Pignotti, 1996b)

The greatest irony was that at the time I wrote that last sentence I, of course, had no idea the extent to which the truth of that statement would be borne out in the comments of the critics in the October 2001 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (Herbert & Gaudiano, 2001) on an article that I was to author (Pignotti & Steinberg, 2001).

So how did I go from such a highly skeptical point of view to one of TFT's most enthusiastic proponents? At a certain point in the discussion, Callahan and I began to have a private dialogue. Although initially very hostile, things eventually cooled down between us and we began to engage in a more civil exchange. His sincerity came through and I began to question my initial impression of him, and to this day, although I take serious issue with his claims, I remain convinced of his sincerity of belief. I discovered that Callahan had graduated from the same university I had (the University of Michigan) and had a legitimate PhD from Syracuse University. He had also taught at the same school as my father had (Eastern Michigan University). Although I was still skeptical, this gave him at least some credibility with me, which opened the door just slightly but enough for me to begin to consider trusting him. We discovered that we had been in common circles of acquaintances at different times and we appeared to share many common values and interests. He became very amiable as we continued our dialogue, which had evolved into a pleasant and interesting conversation. He assured me that his interest was in nothing other than in being scientific and that TFT was not the mystical sort of new age practice I imagined it to be. Callahan informed me that he had been a member of the Skeptic's Society for many years and that he took a philosophical stance that disavowed any form of mysticism. He claimed he had rock-solid proof for TFT in the form of a first-hand experiment anyone could perform and invited me to try his treatment. At this point, I decided that I would at least try his experiment out because as someone who possessed scientific values I valued finding out the truth more than being right in a debate and had the intention and desire to get as accurate an understanding of the views of others as possible. Eventually, he offered to send me some material on TFT, which I accepted although I was still skeptical at that point.

A few weeks later, I was experiencing a very high level of job-related anxiety and decided to take that opportunity to try one of Callahan's algorithms. In TFT, algorithms are treatment recipes, giving specific sequences of acupressure



meridian points to be tapped on, which Callahan claims works on about 80% of the general population. I wrote to Callahan and asked him to send me his algorithm for anxiety. He wrote back, giving the treatment sequence to me, asking me to keep the code he was giving me confidential because he considered it a secret, much like the recipe for Coca Cola. At that time, Callahan was still keeping much of his material secret although trainees of algorithm courses did not officially have to sign any agreement to do so. Later, he published all of his algorithms in his book, *Tapping the Healer Within* (R. J. Callahan & Trubo, 2001).

My experience using this algorithm on myself was nothing short of miraculous. After just one time through the algorithm, within less than a minute, my anxiety went away. I felt a sense within my body of a physical release of tension and along with it an emotional high. Although I had previously experimented with many unconventional treatment approaches, I had never in my life experienced anything like this. From that point on, everything changed for me. I completely stopped thinking critically about TFT and openly embraced it.

Next, Callahan encouraged me to write a post about my experience on two electronic mailing lists, each of which had approximately 500 people (mostly mental health professionals) subscribing to them. In retrospect, what I now realize is that from a social psychology perspective (Cialdini, 2001) making a public commitment of this nature in the presence of this many people further solidified my new convictions about TFT and locked me into a mindset that I spent years justifying while explaining away any contradictions.

Callahan had written to me that he had heard from another therapist that this entire exchange between the two of us had been so unbelievable that some people were accusing him and me of having been in cahoots all along and having staged our whole electronic mailing list debate and my conversion as a way to promote TFT. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

### MY FIRST YEAR AS A TFT PROPONENT

From that point on, I became a zealous, enthusiastic supporter of TFT. I continued to work at my full-time hospital research job, where my job duties sometimes required me to be there before 6 a.m. as a project coordinator, along with doing TFT. I was working very long hours.

I treated myself with TFT for my addiction to coffee and immediately stopped drinking my usual two to four cups per day with no withdrawal symptoms, and I attributed that success to yet another TFT miracle in my life. I spent a great deal of time on the Internet. I have a natural ability to

write very quickly, so I wrote volumes of material, vigorously defending TFT in various discussion groups while continuing my e-mail exchanges with Callahan and reading everything I could on TFT, which had become an obsession for me. I soon lost all interest in applying to any PhD programs, something that had previously been a very important goal of mine, and completely devoted much of the time outside of my job to TFT.

In the winter and spring of 1997, I took the beginning-level algorithm trainings, all the while having regular e-mail communication with Roger Callahan, who gladly engaged in extensive dialogue with me and answered any questions I had. He would send me flattering e-mails, praising my loyalty and understanding of TFT principles. For instance, in one e-mail after I defended him on an electronic mailing list, he wrote, "We have never had anyone with the astuteness, understanding and consistent courage you show" (personal communication, May 23, 1997).

Part of my education in TFT included the redefinition of common therapeutic terminology, along with learning a specialized language connected with TFT. For example, Callahan redefined the word *cure* as being the complete elimination of all self-reported emotional distress, regardless of how long these effects lasted (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000). Callahan had come up with an ad hoc hypothesis that if the alleged cure did not last it was because the person had come into contact with a toxin—something the person ate, drank, or inhaled—that undid the cure. This idea of toxins was one of the ways Callahan explained away a treatment's failure to hold up over time. What I did not realize at the time was that the use of such ad hoc hypotheses to explain away failures was one of the hallmark indicators of a pseudoscience, as was our overreliance on testimonials and anecdotal evidence (Lilienfeld, Lynn, & Lohr, 2003).

Whatever objections people had to TFT, Callahan always had a ready answer. For instance, if a person offered alternative explanations for a TFT treatment appearing to work (e.g., placebo effect or distraction), this was dismissed by what Callahan called the "apex problem" (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000). Callahan borrowed Arthur Koestler's (1967) usage of the term *apex* as meaning the capacity to be optimally functioning at one's mental peak. When someone had an apex problem they were failing to do so. He considered such alternative explanations for TFT's apparent efficacy to be the result of cognitive dissonance, which was created because of the strange appearance of TFT. This cognitive dissonance renders the person afflicted with the apex problem incapable of peak mental functioning and thus unable to attribute the results to TFT, compulsively inventing other

explanations that Callahan deemed irrational. The invocation of the apex problem in a conversation about TFT made discussion amongst TFT proponents about any alternative explanations for observed phenomenon impossible. That kind of critical thinking was reframed by Callahan's diagnosis of the person as having the apex problem. TFT critics who suggested the results were due to placebo were disdainfully labeled as having the apex problem. Ironically, it was this reframing of critical thinking as an apex problem that truly hindered a person's ability to achieve peak mental functioning. This concept made it socially unacceptable in Callahan's circles to come up with alternative explanations for TFT. During my period of initial skepticism, I recognized this for what it was but after my conversion to TFT I concluded that I had been wrong and that the apex problem was a legitimate phenomenon.

I began to use TFT on anyone I could, including clients I began to accept in a new private practice of TFT. At first, I did not charge people for my services and let people know I was engaging in an experimental procedure but as I began to see what appeared to me to be miraculous results I began to practice TFT professionally, opening up an office in New York City and getting referrals directly from Callahan. I also began to conduct trainings in TFT algorithms beginning in late 1997. I continued to work at my hospital job and operated my private practice part time. Although I did not make a secret of my practice of TFT to my work colleagues and it was generally known that I had a private practice on the side, no one at my hospital job ever asked for any details and I never volunteered any, so no one knew the extent and depth to which I was involved. I was essentially leading a double life, living in two very different worlds of science and pseudoscience, although I did not see it that way at the time.

TFT appeared to be instantly eliminating emotional distress in people, sometimes distress that had been occurring for years with no relief. At the time I refused to consider the possibility of nonspecific treatment effects occurring because I did not think that any sort of placebo effect could be that powerful; to think that would mean that I had an apex problem. I strenuously objected whenever skeptics accused me of basing my conviction about TFT on faith because we considered these treatment successes to be first-hand scientific experiments, which could be replicated by anyone who wished. We believed that because the results occurred so quickly the cause-and-effect relationship was readily observable. Faith, by contrast, would be a belief in something that was not observable through the senses. Seeing a phobic person change within minutes after a simple tapping procedure,

from being terrified to being completely relaxed and able to deal with the object of the phobia with ease, was definitely something that was tangible and observable.

During the summer of 1997, I trained personally with Roger Callahan at his midlevel course called TFT Diagnosis (TFTDx), a training for which at the time he charged \$5,000. Trainees had to sign nondisclosure agreements for his procedure, which was considered to be a trade secret. Later I learned that most of the secret technique taught on this course was already in the public access, in a book written by someone who had known him much earlier, for which Callahan had written a foreword before he began doing trainings in TFT (Durlacher, 1994). This eventually played a major role in causing him to lose a lawsuit he initiated against a psychologist who began teaching TFTDx (Nicosia, 1997), which resulted in Callahan officially releasing the TFTDx to the public in the form of a home study course (J. Callahan, 1998).

## VOICE TECHNOLOGY

It was also during this period of time that I learned about the highest level of TFT training, Voice Technology (VT). At that time, only four other people had trained in VT and the cost of the training was (and still is) \$100,000. VT trainees must sign what Callahan claimed to be strict, legally binding agreements never to reveal the trade secret of what VT consists of. I became determined that I was going to find a way to do the VT training, whatever it took. Although I did not have anything even close to \$100,000, I worked out an arrangement with Callahan. Nevertheless, the amount I paid him was, for me, a very large sum that amounted to more than what I had spent on my total college and graduate school education. In February 1998, I flew out to California where I spent four days training one-on-one with Callahan. Most of the people I knew who did VT were not wealthy. Some sold property to do the training and others took out extensive loans for amounts they could not easily repay. One colleague decided against doing the VT training because his wife had threatened to divorce him if he did. One woman told me that her friends had even considered arranging for an intervention with her when they found out what she was planning to do, similar to the kinds of interventions I had carried out on people involved in cults. She and I laughed about it at the time, but in retrospect I wish that someone had attempted one on me before I made what I now consider to be a major mistake, although in all likelihood any attempt to reason with me at that point would have failed.

Because of my legally binding confidentiality agreement, I cannot describe specifics of what VT consists of,

so I will limit my description here to what others have already said about VT along with my personal experience, omitting the confidential details. Upon my arrival at the Callahan home, I was given a contract to sign that revealed surprising information to me about VT of which I had not previously been aware. Before I read the contract, Roger appeared to be very nervous. His wife was present and she asked him if he would like to explain things to me but he declined and asked that I just read the contract. I was completely stunned by what was on the contract; it was not what I had expected. Nevertheless, in my state of shock and confusion with no one else to discuss this with, although I was given the opportunity to back out of the agreement, I elected to proceed with the VT training. In spite of the circumstances of there being psychological influences at work, I have no wish to portray myself as a victim here. I could have chosen to walk out of the Callahan home at that point but lacked whatever strength would have been necessary to counteract those influences, and instead I went along with the process, making what turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

Again, following Cialdini's (2001) principle of commitment and consistency, having made the commitment I did and in an effort to minimize the tremendous cognitive dissonance I was experiencing, I thereafter rationalized the inconsistencies and incongruity between what I had expected of VT and what it actually turned out to be. I was deeply committed and in way over my head, financially and emotionally. Roger repeatedly flattered me during the training by stating what an honor and a pleasure it was for him to be training me, how I had picked up VT faster than anyone he had ever trained, and repeating what he had said previously about my understanding of TFT principles being beyond that of anyone he had ever trained. He shared some deeply personal things about himself and our emotional bond grew tremendously. One thing he shared he has spoken publicly about (R. J. Callahan, 1998a). He told me that prior to his experiences in discovering TFT he had been an atheist, but since witnessing the miracles of nature displayed in TFT he had come to believe in God, for there had to be a consciousness as prime mover for such specificity and order to exist, which could not have evolved by chance.

By the end of the training, I was more committed and enthusiastic about TFT and VT than ever. However, at the back of my mind there were the seeds of doubt beginning to take root that never fully went away. Although I would have vigorously denied it at the time, after having learned the secret of VT there was a part of me that knew that something was very wrong with the kinds of claims Callahan was making about the objectivity of VT. I

fought very hard to make sense of something that inherently did not make sense.

Once back in New York City, I began practicing VT. Although some of the people I treated reported miraculous improvements, there were those with whom the VT appeared to have no effect at all or only a very temporary improvement. However, these apparent failures were explained away by Callahan's theory that if a problem returned or if a person was not responding to treatment, the cause was almost always due to what Callahan calls an Individual Energy Toxin (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000; R. J. Callahan, 2001c). An Individual Energy Toxin is something the person has consumed, inhaled, or otherwise come into contact with. Callahan maintains that when the correct Individual Energy Toxins are identified and the person abstains from them, successful treatment results will then hold up over time. If they do not, even after toxin identification, he recommends looking for more toxins because he believes that what an individual is toxic to can change from day to day. This makes his claims on toxins unfalsifiable and puts them outside the domain of science, but at the time I did not see it that way. This leads some TFT therapists on seemingly endless hunting expeditions with certain unresponsive clients.

According to TFT theory, if a treatment is failing to reduce a person's emotional distress level, this is due to a toxin in the immediate environment, such as the person's clothing or perfume. On one audiotape provided to trainees, where TFT failed to reduce a man's level of physical pain, Callahan, treating him over the telephone, asked his female therapist to leave the room and then had the man remove every bit of his clothing because it had all tested as toxic (R. J. Callahan, 1998b). When the man was completely naked, he reported a reduction in his pain level and Callahan concludes that this is evidence for how toxins can impede a treatment. This tape is a typical example of the manner in which Callahan used anecdotal evidence to attempt to support his claims.

It was my experience that most clients would not comply with the therapist's request to abstain from identified toxins (often involving favorite, commonly eaten foods) and would stop therapy. However, because I took Callahan's calls for him when he was away and unable to do so, I was aware that he was more persuasive than I was. He had clients who had been with him for months or even years and called him on a regular basis whenever their symptoms returned. They frequently had much of what they consumed tested with VT. Some had become so obsessed with toxins that they would have every meal they consumed checked beforehand. Because he charges \$600 per hour with a minimum of 5 hours, this can get quite expensive. Callahan was not



doing this to intentionally con people; his sincerity was evident to his students when he would bring his own sandwiches on wheat-free bread to trainings rather than eating at the hotel restaurant and could be observed constantly checking what he ate, drank, and even the clothes he wore, making it obvious that he practiced what he preached.

People who did not respond to VT were told that they were in a very small minority because Callahan's claim is that VT is 97 to 98% successful (R. J. Callahan & Callahan, 2000). It is important, however, to bear in mind that Callahan's definition of success, as noted previously, means the client's immediate report of reduced distress level. In 1999, a psychologist from Arizona practicing VT was sanctioned by the Arizona Board of Psychologist Examiners (1999) for making advertising claims of a 95% success rate and was forbidden to practice TFT and VT within the context of his licensure as a psychologist. He was so committed to TFT that he gave up his license and practiced TFT VT exclusively, although a few years later he split with Callahan and now practices his own offshoot of TFT VT.

During the years 1998 to 2001, I continued to hold down my job at the hospital in addition to practicing VT and devoting a great deal of time to collaborating with Callahan on a number of writing projects on TFT. One of the projects Callahan enlisted my help with was a chapter we published for an edited volume on innovative therapies (R. J. Callahan & Pignotti, 2001). In the preface to the chapter, psychologist Ray Corsini (2001), who also edited the book, wrote,

This system is probably the most outlandish in the book. I finally accepted it after two rejections, when at my request Dr. Callahan took on a collaborator. . . . What is to be made of TFT? It is either one of the greatest advances in psychotherapy or it is a hoax. If the latter, the prime victim of the system is none other than Dr. Callahan. . . . I don't doubt his sincerity. (p. 689)

I continued to spend much time on the Internet, engaging in numerous debates with critics about TFT. I ran my own electronic mailing list, TFT-ALGO, which was at that time the official electronic mailing list for TFT algorithm trainees. I quickly gained a reputation of being Callahan's most enthusiastic, outspoken, dedicated, loyal, and (I am now ashamed to say) fanatical proponent. There was, however, one prescient statement I made on an electronic mailing list in the midst of a heated debate I was involved in with some TFT critics. I wrote, "So far TFT has stood up to my doubts and scrutiny. If it ever fails to do so, I will be the first to let you know" (Pignotti, 1999).

## TFT'S SKEPTICS AND THE JOURNAL OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Late in 1999, Roger Callahan received an e-mail from Brandon Gaudiano, who at that time was a 1st-year PhD psychology student from Drexel/MCP Hahneman University. (He has since graduated with his PhD.) Callahan forwarded this e-mail to me, asking me to respond if I wished. Gaudiano wrote,

Your "therapy" smacks of pseudoscience. In fact, your therapy reflects many of the characteristics of a pseudoscience: using personal experience as evidence, making dramatic and overstated claims about effectiveness, explaining the mechanisms at work in pseudoscientific terminology to confuse people who don't know better, keeping methodology and techniques a secret, etc. . . . You contribute to putting our profession two steps back for every foot we try to step forward. However, be warned that the party won't last for long. Eventually, scientists will be taking a more critical look at your methods as they become more outraged. (personal communication, December 19, 1999)

I wrote an equally impassioned response back to him, vigorously defending TFT, which I concluded by writing,

I suggest that you save your e-mail to Dr. Callahan and take it out 10 years from now and look at it again—you might find you have a very different perspective at that time and be quite embarrassed at the arrogance and outright ignorance you have displayed towards a man who has devoted the past 50 years to finding better ways of helping people who had not previously been helped by any known form of psychological treatment. (personal communication, 1999)

Gaudiano (personal communication, January 11, 2000) responded back that he thought it would be a good idea for both of us to look at this correspondence 10 years later. He also set up a Web site, Debunking Thought Field Therapy (see [http://www.geocities.com/pseudoscience\\_2000/](http://www.geocities.com/pseudoscience_2000/)), which he still maintains. In June 2000, Gaudiano and his mentor, Drexel University Psychology Professor James Herbert, wrote a critical analysis of TFT for the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer* (Gaudiano & Herbert, 2000).

In early 2000, Callahan was invited to discuss TFT with psychologists on an electronic mailing list of the Society for a Scientific Clinical Psychology. A very intense discussion ensued, debating many aspects of TFT, and several psychologists were not satisfied with the responses he gave. There were repeated requests for data to support his claims but instead Callahan sent them instructions for his treatment for trauma and asked for people to make commitments to do this treatment as an experiment with people suffering from trauma and report



back on the results. However, he also maintained that this would be a test for their honesty, integrity, and ability to follow instructions, because if they did not have success with the majority of cases it would mean that they were not doing the procedure correctly. Not surprisingly, no one took him up on his offer.

After repeated requests for data, Callahan complained during the discussion that his work had not been published because of journal editor and peer reviewer bias against innovative treatments. At that point, the editor of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Larry Beutler, who was a member of the discussion group, offered him an unprecedented opportunity: to publish five research articles of his choosing in his journal, which would be accepted without peer review (Beutler, 2001). Instead, each article was to be accompanied by a review that would be printed in the journal, along with a final response to the critics from Callahan. Each article had a disclaimer at the beginning, noting that it had not been subject to peer review.

Callahan immediately enlisted my help in writing the first of two articles he was to author for this issue (R. J. Callahan, 2001a). We were in daily contact during the writing of this article. I spent many hours at the New York Academy of Medicine in New York City, doing database searches and obtaining articles to use as references on heart rate variability (HRV). I also assisted him with writing the manuscript for his first article. In addition to the work I did for Callahan, I also coauthored a paper of my own on TFT and HRV (Pignotti & Steinberg, 2001). Callahan wrote a second manuscript on HRV and his toxin theory (R. J. Callahan, 2001b) but I was at a loss as to how I could be helpful to him in improving it. Instead, I pleaded with him as gently as I could to not submit it because I realized it would not make sense to anyone not familiar with his work, but he disagreed and regarded it as an elegant masterpiece. I felt embarrassed for him but realized there was nothing I could do to stop him. When I read the critique of that article, which described it as "far-fetched cases that blur the boundaries between farce and expository prose" (Kline, 2001, p. 1188), I was forced to agree even though at the time I disagreed with most of what the critics of these pieces had to say.

The critics (Herbert and Gaudiano, 2001; Kline, 2001; Lohr, 2001; McNally, 2001; Rosen & Davison, 2001; Rosner, 2001; see also Johnson, Shala, Sejdijaj, Odell, & Dabishevci, 2001; Sakai et al., 2001) were brutal but at the time I dismissed most of what they had to say. The consensus of these critiques was that TFT proponents had failed to meet the burden of proof in what was presented and that this, rather than bias, explained previous failures to publish.

## A TURNING POINT AND MY VT EXPERIMENT

In early 2001, the VT practitioners had a 2-day meeting in Hawaii. Of the 12 active VT practitioners, 7 were in attendance along with Roger Callahan and his wife, Joanne. We were all looking forward to the meeting because practicing VT, with all its secrecy, was an extremely isolating experience and it was good to finally have some contact and opportunity for open discussion with colleagues.

There was, however, an ethical matter that had been weighing on my conscience for the past 3 years regarding how the VT was being represented to others on the part of Callahan and certain practitioners, which I had decided to bring up at the meeting. Although I had made every effort not to be a party to this, my knowledge that this was occurring along with my legal obligation to remain silent to outsiders presented an ethical dilemma for me that I felt I needed to resolve. Because of my legally binding confidentiality agreement, I cannot divulge specifics on what was troubling me but it is important to mention here because this incident had a major impact on the doubts I was beginning to have about TFT and VT. I had informed Callahan, in advance, that I planned to bring it up and although he was visibly very uncomfortable he allowed it. I shared with the group my concerns on this matter, but with the exception of one other person who came to my defense the others did not see that there was any problem at all. They seemed to be in denial about a matter that I thought could have dire long-term consequences for people practicing VT. I took a very strong stance that the misrepresentation I objected to had to stop, strongly implying that if it did not I could no longer be involved with VT. Callahan and his wife attempted to portray this as my problem and offered to treat me with TFT for it. My response to him was that "you can't tap away an ethical dilemma" and I refused to let him treat me for this. Because of the high status I possessed within the VT community and probably because Callahan did not want yet another defector I got Callahan to make some concessions on the matter and an agreement to make certain changes, but shortly before I severed ties with him I learned that he had not lived up to his end of the agreement.

Another area of doubt I raised at the meeting was the fact that several VT practitioners had noticed that the testing with VT for toxins had been inconsistent on a number of occasions. For example, two VT people could be testing one person for a toxin and come out with opposite results. If this was a precision technology, I wondered, how could that be? I brought this up with Callahan and his response was that what was a toxin for a person could change, even from one moment to the

next. Joanne attempted to tie this in with concepts from quantum physics in a way that did not make sense to me but Callahan opined that her explanation was brilliant. I did not find their responses satisfying and could not understand why they rejected my suggestion to directly test interrater reliability for the toxin test. When I suggested that we put two or three VT practitioners on the telephone at the same time and test a person for toxins to determine to what extent their results were consistent, Callahan opined that this was a terrible idea, although I could not understand why.

This meeting was a major turning point in my relationship with Callahan. The price I paid was tension between us for several months, which paved the way for an increasingly conflicted relationship. The events at the meeting led me to further question the credibility of the claims he was making about VT and its high success rate. This was a time of great internal conflict for me and because I had no one I could discuss this with I attempted to sort things out in my own mind by keeping a private document on my computer that I later deleted, where I wrote out all my thoughts and doubts, explicitly admitting them to myself for the first time. Through this process, a number of other memories leading to doubts began to surface. For instance, at one time, shortly after training in VT, I had offered to go through the archive Callahan kept of all of his VT tape-recorded sessions (at this point he was taping all his sessions with the clients' permission) and extract data on pretreatment and post-treatment distress levels, enter it into a database, and analyze it. I had thought at the time that it would be an excellent way to document his claimed 97% success rate for VT, but he rejected this idea and asked me to help him put together a casebook of successful TFT cases instead. I began to wonder what I would have found had I been granted access to these audiotapes and why he had not liked my idea, given all the requests he had received to provide data he claimed to have.

In retrospect, I realize that my doubts and uncertainty were negatively influencing my ability to sell VT to prospective clients and so my practice at that point was dwindling. I had begun giving my clients a lengthy informed consent form to read and sign before engaging in VT, which stated that no published controlled studies existed and that the therapy was considered controversial. I even included the Web address to Gaudiano's Debunking TFT site, and I encouraged prospective clients to check out both sides. Surprisingly, this seemed to make no difference in my clients' decision to proceed with VT. If there was any question in my mind as to the outcome of the VT treatment, I did not cash my clients' checks. As a result of my dwindling practice, my financial difficulties became

quite serious and I accumulated a large amount of debt. To make matters worse, the grants I had been working on at my hospital job were winding down so I was working fewer hours. In April 2001, I began sending out my resume with the goal of obtaining full-time employment in a research position, but the economy had gotten very bad and such work was not easy to come by. Although, other than student loans, I had never been in debt before in my life, at this point I had to borrow money each month just to make ends meet, resulting in soaring credit card debt.

To add to my troubles, the first person Callahan trained in VT, Gary Craig, who has long since severed ties with him, had been challenging VT and maintaining that no special technology was needed and that one could just tap on the meridian points in any sequence. He had come up with his own offshoot, Emotional Freedom Techniques (Craig, 1998). This had been a controversial subject in the TFT community for quite some time and many people were convinced by what Craig was saying while VT proponents were insisting that they had consistently been able to help people with these specialized sequences, clients who had not been helped by just tapping on all the points. In essence, what we had were conflicting anecdotes. This produced a dilemma for prospective clients, who did not know whether to believe the VT practitioners and spend up to \$600 per hour for treatment or do EFT, which could be downloaded free of charge on the Internet (see <http://www.emofree.com>).

By the summer of 2001, seriously questioning some of the claims being made about TFT and VT, I came to the conclusion that the only way this was going to be resolved was to actually conduct some research. I could no longer suppress my doubts; I had to know the truth regardless of the consequences. After all, if VT was really the precision technology it claimed to be that could cure people in minutes when nothing else would, then the \$100,000 being charged to VT trainees and the large fees being passed along to clients would be well justified. Fortunately, although I had never done an outcome study, I did have training in research methodology from my MSW program, where I had majored in research, as well as 4 years' experience at my hospital job. It was a common practice at beginning-level TFT trainings to have VT demonstrations, which I had been providing to classes for several years and was asked to do on a regular basis. I decided that I would, without telling anyone, conduct a study and use the participants at these trainings as my subjects. I informed them I was collecting data and obtained their permission to participate, but I did not inform them that half of them were receiving actual VT, whereas the other half was receiving sham VT—randomly selected sequence TFT points that I made to sound exactly like VT

(Pignotti, 2005c). I wrote the names of each treatment point on a small slip of paper and literally drew them out of a hat to construct 24 different sequences, so each person in the control group could have a different sequence, just as they would with VT.

The results from the first class I tried this with stunned me. I was getting exactly the same results with the sham VT as I was with the actual VT; 97% of the people were reporting complete elimination of distress as measured by the subjective units of distress (Wolpe, 1969), a scale wherein people rated their emotional distress on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being a complete absence of distress and 10 being the worst it could be. Some of the people in the experiment had failed to achieve relief with the common algorithms. For instance, when I administered the sham sequence to one woman who had repeatedly reported her distress level to be unchanged and at a 10 with algorithms, her subjective units of distress instantly went down to a 1, just as typically happened with the actual VT. Obviously, something other than the precision VT was at work here in effecting this dramatic change. As my sample size grew, the two groups statistically looked more and more alike. This completely went against all the basic assumptions, theory, and claims made by Callahan regarding TFT because he considered his VT to be a precision tool that could help people in a way that just tapping in random order could not. The importance of determining sequence was the foundation and rationale for the levels of TFT training and the results of this experiment demolished that foundation. If sequence did not matter, there would be no reason to have any of the specialized assessment procedures taught in the TFTDx or VT trainings; these expensive trainings and their cost to consumers would be unnecessary.

After a few months of collecting data, I broke the news to Callahan, who expressed astonishment. At this point, he wasn't at all angry with me or defensive and seemed genuinely curious and open to discussion. Because of his openness to discussion, the conflict and animosity between us lessened. Several weeks of e-mail and telephone discussions ensued in which we both twisted ourselves into pretzels trying to explain away the results. In spite of my doubts, I too had a strong vested interest in a positive outcome and really wanted to believe that my study was somehow flawed. Callahan wanted to know if my random sequences would work with people who had not responded to VT or his specialized Dx sequences. In August 2001, at his request, I posted to the electronic mailing list of TFT practitioners, asking for volunteers who had had difficulty responding to TFT algorithms or TFTDx procedures to participate in a "cutting-edge experiment" that would use some new algorithms I had

developed. From this, I got several more positive reports from people who had no idea that these were simply random sequences. There were a few who reported no difference but these were people who had not been helped by any form of TFT. Nevertheless, I was reluctant to announce my results because Callahan had strongly discouraged me from doing so and convinced me that my results were inconclusive. I did not want to do something that could potentially destroy what I still believed was the most powerful therapy available unless I was very sure that the data warranted the conclusion that VT had been falsified.

On August 12, 2001, I received a call from a VT colleague. The psychologist who had been working for him in his practice was leaving and he asked me if I'd be interested in joining him as a partner in VT and as an employee in his practice in California. On Labor Day weekend, 2001, I flew out to California to meet with him. TFT VT was only a small part of his practice, the bulk of which consisted of neuropsychological testing, specializing in learning disorders, psychotherapy, and EEG biofeedback, which he was willing to have me formally trained in so I could be his technician. He and I got along really well personally and I found the atmosphere in his office stimulating and interesting. I decided to take the position and make the move from New York City to California.

On September 6, 2001, I returned to New York and on September 10, gave 1 month's notice at my hospital job. The following day was September 11 and being only a mile and a half from Ground Zero, along with millions of other New Yorkers I watched in horror as the World Trade Towers collapsed, wondering if and when other attacks were coming. All of a sudden, we were faced with what we believed were literally millions of traumatized people, and still believing that I was in possession of the most powerful treatment for trauma on the planet, I naturally wanted to do all I could to alleviate the pain and suffering. I was inundated with requests from TFT practitioners for my special algorithms, and because I had received such miraculous reports from people about the results I freely provided them as well as offering to stand by and give VT support to anyone who wished it.

At the time, although I was still thinking about my study, the importance of the findings naturally paled in comparison to the horrifying events of 9/11 and I became pragmatic, doing what appeared to work best. I was also focusing a great deal of time and energy on my preparing for my upcoming move to California, which I had planned for mid-October. I began to experience symptoms of severe anxiety, probably due to all the stress that I had been under. I experienced chills along with a high degree of irritability and anxiety, which after 4 days had not gone



away and was getting worse. On September 24, my symptoms got to the point where I experienced, for the first and only time in my life, the beginnings of a panic attack. I knew the symptoms because of all the people I had worked with who had panic disorder and also a member of my family has panic disorder. I tried some of the random algorithms from my study but they had no effect. Feeling as if I was about to have a heart attack, I then called Roger Callahan and asked for help, letting him know that I had tried my random algorithms and that they had not worked. He was very reassuring and gave me a VT sequence that immediately eliminated my symptoms. I have not had another panic attack since then although I have learned that single panic attacks in people who do not have the disorder are not uncommon (Barlow, 2002); thus, this would likely have been the result without my having had any TFT. Nevertheless, at the time I had the mistaken belief that such symptoms would inevitably lead to panic disorder if no intervention was done, so I attributed the success to TFT. This caused me to doubt the validity of my study results.

Callahan later pointed out that after that experience I completely lost interest in the results of my VT experiment, and he was correct. After that, I simply stopped thinking about the entire matter and turned all my attention and energy to my upcoming move to California and beginning my new job. In retrospect, I realized that the cognitive dissonance had gotten to the point where it was too great for me to deal with, so I just automatically put my attention elsewhere and did not think about the study for 2 years.

### **CUMULATIVE DOUBTS: HOW I CAME TO CHANGE MY MIND**

On October 17, 2001, I made the move to California and began my new job and VT partnership. Although I was geographically much closer to Callahan, during the ensuing years our relationship seemed to become more and more conflicted and distant. Although I was not thinking about my study, there were a number of other occurrences that resulted in my having further doubts about TFT. None of these events, in and of themselves, would have been sufficient for me to seriously doubt and consider discontinuing my practice and endorsement of TFT but they had a cumulative effect on me, slowly and gradually over time, although I did not discuss these doubts with anyone.

My doubts and concerns fell into several broad categories: (a) Some people seemed to be getting little or no long-term results with TFT or VT and this was getting

explained away. (b) I observed discrepancies between Callahan's professed exclusive interest in science versus my observation of his toleration and de facto endorsement of new age mysticism at his own conference and elsewhere. (c) Callahan made misrepresentations of the literature that became increasingly blatant. (d) Increasingly grandiose claims were being made for VT in many different areas but especially for physical conditions. I present the following anecdotes related to each of these areas not as evidence against TFT but rather to give the reader some insight into the subjective process I went through in beginning to doubt TFT's claims, which were unsupported in the first place.

Working in a practice with a psychologist who engaged in practices other than TFT/VT, I had the chance, for the first time, to see what the actual long-term results were of VT on many of the patients. Previously, in my own practice in New York, I was usually doing only very brief TFT/VT therapy that lacked follow-up. However, since I was in a setting where patients were returning for a number of other services provided to them, I got to see the actual impact of TFT on their various disorders. From what I observed, in many cases it was minimal and not sufficient to actually cure a person or make a major change in what they had been diagnosed with. For instance, when someone was suffering from a depressive disorder, they might experience temporary relief in a TFT/VT session but the feelings would soon return and there would not be a significant change in their overall condition. Of course, TFT theory explained this away as exposure to toxins, and because few people were willing to comply with the recommendation to stay away from identified culprits (often their favorite foods) we could rationalize the failure as being the fault of the patient who did not comply with our recommendations. However, I was beginning to question this and to wonder how effective TFT really was. Even though we did continue to have what appeared to be dramatic successes with some people, for others TFT appeared to be accomplishing very little and I began to wonder if the claimed 98% success rate was really accurate.

My second area of doubt had to do with the discrepancy between TFT's professed science values and what was actually being practiced. From our first discussions, Callahan had maintained that he had no interest in new age mysticism and was only interested in science and following the facts of reality, wherever they led. However, I could no longer ignore increasing evidence that he failed to advocate for science when opportunities arose and instead displayed a high degree of tolerance and even protectiveness toward the many new agers who had been attracted to TFT, especially the ones who had paid to take



his trainings. For instance, at the first conference for the ATFT held in October 2002, I was one of the speakers. My topic was the philosophy of science and how this relates to TFT principles. For my presentation, I was allotted only half an hour, whereas another speaker was allotted an hour and a half for her keynote speech on the topic of Pet TFT, which included a videotape of a pet psychic. She maintained pet psychics were relevant to what we did in TFT, stating that if we were open to TFT we should also be open to pet psychics. I observed Callahan sitting through the entire presentation, not once offering any argument or objection to the pet psychic video during the presentation itself or in the question period that followed. When I mentioned it to him later, he had nothing to say in response. This incident spoke volumes to me about what the ATFT's actual priorities were regarding science as opposed to the lip service paid to science. Also, new age books on various forms of mysticism and pseudoscience were being sold and the Callahans did nothing to stop this. Whenever I tried to protest that these new-age proponents were damaging our chances of gaining credibility with the scientific community, he would respond that they had the right to believe as they wished, apparently missing my point that this was occurring at a conference that was supposed to represent his method. I had repeatedly challenged such people on his electronic mailing list but Callahan asked that I not do this because, although he agreed with me, it stirred up too much conflict and bad feelings amongst TFT colleagues. He had also begun a relationship with an association of practitioners of a form of energy therapy called Reiki, which offered a "Doctor of Energetic Healing" program that consisted of TFT and Reiki training courses (see <http://www.reikione.com/cgi-bin/news.cgi?mode=Current&message=48>), which they claimed legally entitled people who completed it to use the title *Doctor*. One of the instructors who had AIDS credited TFT with saving his life (Hanson, 2002). I had the sense that every time I attempted to take a step forward to attempt to get TFT some scientific credibility, this kind of decision on Callahan's part took us two steps backward.

As someone with a background in research, I could also no longer ignore the misrepresentations of the literature being made by TFT proponents not only in the area of TFT and HRV (e.g., see R. J. Callahan, 2002, 2004a; for an analysis, see Pignotti, 2005a, 2005b) but in other areas as well. For instance, he had misinterpreted a study done at Florida State University (Carbonell & Figley, 1999) in which TFT and three other novel therapies had been studied. Callahan and Trubo (2001) reported that TFT was shown to be significantly more effective than the other three therapies in the study, when the published report clearly showed that this was not the case. The study

was not set up as a comparison study and there was no way, from just the data, that TFT was shown to be superior to the other approaches. When I pointed this out to Callahan, he implied to me that the actual results favoring TFT had in some way been suppressed, but I never saw any evidence that such was the case.

My final area of doubts and concerns had to do with the increasingly grandiose and unwarranted claims being made for TFT by Roger and Joanne Callahan and some of their VT practitioners. For instance, he posted to the TFT Algorithm electronic mailing list that he had successfully treated a person for sudden loss of vision and speech with VT (R. J. Callahan, 2004a). In another posting (R. J. Callahan, 2004b), he reported that a VT therapist had successfully treated eye problems in a patient with multiple sclerosis, and this was later reported in the TFT newsletter (Barron, 2004). In another article, it was even claimed that TFT could stop hiccups (J. Callahan, 2003). Yet another article claimed that TFT could successfully treat cardiac arrhythmia (Barron, 2001) and I received a phone call from someone who had read the article on the Internet and asked me if I could treat him for his cardiac arrhythmia. I responded that I was not an MD and could not. These are just a few examples of the many unwarranted claims that were being made, which I found disturbing.

In July 2003, I became aware of a book that had recently come out entitled *Science and Pseudoscience in Clinical Psychology* (Lilienfeld, Lynn & Lohr, 2003). I had read an outline of the chapters and heard that TFT had been mentioned. Deciding to eventually write a critical review of the book for the TFT newsletter, I ordered a copy. At the same time, I ordered another book, unrelated to TFT, entitled *Remembering Trauma*, by Richard J. McNally (2003), which was about trauma and memory, a subject I had a high degree of interest in given my work with people who had been in cults and the memory issues they faced. Coincidentally, McNally had been one of the psychologists who had written one of the critiques in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* issue on TFT (McNally, 2001). When the books arrived, I read some of the relevant chapters in *Science and Pseudoscience in Clinical Psychology*, thinking about how I would critique them. At the time, I dismissed what the authors had to say about TFT completely but I never got around to writing the critique and did not read McNally's book until several months later.

In the fall of 2003, I was invited by the ATFT Board of Directors to head a task force and eventually chair a committee to create a scientific archive of Callahan's work. I accepted the position but as I began work on writing up the guidelines it occurred to me that there could potentially be conflict between Callahan and myself about what sort of

material would be valid for such an archive. For instance, Callahan endorsed a book by an intelligent design theorist (Foster, 1985) that he saw as highly scientific and relevant to TFT theory but which I saw as a pseudoscientific apology for creationism. I was also beginning to go against his statements that controlled studies were not needed for TFT and was arguing that we needed to do such studies if we were ever to gain scientific credibility. At that time, I still did not agree with the critics' assessment of TFT but I was coming to realize that this research needed to be done. Callahan did not argue against me on this point but I knew that his position had not changed on the matter and he still did not believe that such studies were necessary. I began to think increasingly about finding a way to get some solid research done on TFT, and the more doubts I accumulated about what was happening around me in the TFT community, the more convinced I became that such research was necessary not only for TFT's reputation but more importantly to find out the truth about which parts of TFT were valid and which were not. I was no longer willing to accept TFT's efficacy based solely on clinical experience because I was gradually coming to terms with the fact I was seeing very mixed results. Amazingly, during this entire time, I did not think about the experiment I had done with VT back in 2001.

In December 2003, I began to read McNally's (2003) book *Remembering Trauma*. I was tremendously impressed with his intellectual honesty, integrity, and method of following the data wherever it took him. Reading the book revived a strong interest I had once had in doing research, a field I had basically abandoned when I became so absorbed in TFT. It also became very evident to me that McNally's method of careful research and systematic critical analysis was the antithesis of Callahan's methods, which McNally had directly criticized in his article entitled "Tertullian's Motto and Callahan's Method" (McNally, 2001). It occurred to me that McNally was precisely the sort of scientific person I had always wanted to see get involved with TFT and although I had a fantasy about this happening I realized that given his strong critique this was highly unlikely. Once again, I wondered what was wrong with TFT and Callahan's method, which appeared to be repelling the very people I so much wanted to see involved. Instead, TFT was becoming a magnet for new-age proponents and, by my estimation, fewer and fewer credible professionals were getting involved.

In January 2004, I sent an e-mail to Rich McNally, complementing him on his book and asking him some questions I had about it. He wrote me a thoughtful, detailed response and we began a dialogue that eventually evolved into discussing TFT and his critique. He was very honest with me about his opinions of TFT and wrote,

I don't know Roger Callahan personally. The editor of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* did ask me to read an accepted ms [manuscript] of Callahan's with an eye to writing a commentary on it. Frankly, Monica, I was taken aback by his article; I had never read anything like it in my entire life (and I have reviewed hundreds of mss [manuscripts] for publication before, perhaps a thousand in my career). Unsurprisingly, my commentary was very critical. (personal communication, February 1, 2004)

Although I had realized that he was not a fan of TFT, the strength of his statement still shocked me but at the same time I realized that I had no way to defend my favorable views on TFT. Instead, I admitted to him that I had been having serious doubts about TFT and that I had decided things needed to change in terms of doing good research. This admission on my part was an important turning point for me because, although I had been thinking things through for several months, it was the first time I had verbalized my doubts and misgivings to anyone outside the TFT community. I'll always greatly appreciate the time he took to have a thoughtful, respectful discussion with me on TFT, especially because the topic was outside where his major professional interests lie.

As postings came in from the various TFT electronic mailing lists I was on, I became aware that somewhere in my thought process my attitude had changed and what I was reading was beginning to look like utter nonsense to me. At that point, I once again picked up the book *Science and Pseudoscience in Clinical Psychology* and began to read the opening chapter, where Lilienfeld, Lynn, and Lohr (2003) listed some of the hallmark indicators of pseudoscience. When I read the first one, which described the overuse of ad hoc hypotheses to explain away failures, it suddenly dawned on me that this was precisely what was going on with TFT when Callahan used the concept of toxins to explain away treatment results failing or not holding up over time. For this reason, we were not able to learn from our experiences because we had reframed the failures as successes and that the client just had a toxin problem and would not comply with our protocol.

When I read this, a very dramatic shift in my state of mind occurred. I realized that I had been involved with a pseudoscience and that Callahan's claims and methods had not been valid. Realizing this was emotionally very overpowering for me because it dawned on me that I had just spent 7 years of my life being an enthusiastic proponent for a therapy that was making unwarranted claims and in all likelihood was not what it claimed to be. I realized at that point that to continue as I had been with TFT would be living a lie, given the awareness I now had, and that there would be no way I could do so with a clear conscience. I began to think of possible research projects I could do and how I might accomplish them. It was then

that it suddenly dawned on me that I already had some data, and for the first time in a very long time I thought about the experiment I had done with VT and wondered if it might be publishable. A few days later I spoke with Rich McNally on the telephone and I told him about my VT experiment. He warned me about problems I might have with publication because of the many weaknesses this study had inherited from other studies I was replicating (e.g., no valid assessment measures and lack of follow-up). However, he did agree with me that it falsified the claim for VT, that its precision at diagnosing treatment sequences was responsible for a putative 97% success rate. He was the first person outside TFT circles that I told about this experiment.

I decided that I could no longer practice VT and that I would write up my experiment and attempt to have it published. I decided to contact Scott Lilienfeld, who is the editor of a journal that deals with studies and critiques of unconventional treatment approaches, *The Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*. When I informed him about my study, he was very interested and asked me to write it up and send him a draft. I immediately began working on the manuscript.

I decided that given I had come to a definite decision it was time for me to let Callahan know where I stood along with confessing all my other doubts and questions about TFT. I decided in the interest of fairness that I would give him one last chance to consider my experiment and to determine whether he could admit that he had been wrong, even if it contradicted cherished beliefs and anecdotal experience. Although I had decided that I could not in all good conscience continue to practice VT, I was willing to stand by Callahan if he was willing to change his attitude, drop the unsupported claims, and perform rigorous testing on TFT.

I had made another posting to the TFT electronic mailing list, making one last call for reports on people's results with my "special algorithms" that Callahan had requested I make back in 2001. Coincidentally, one of the practitioners who had used my random algorithms (she did not, of course, know they were random) had phoned me and given me a glowing report on how she had been successfully using them for the past 2 years. I collected a few additional reports, one of them reporting that my "algorithms" had worked where Callahan's specialized TFT diagnosis had failed. I sent Callahan a private e-mail, opening the dialogue by pointing this out. He responded to me that he did not believe the results could possibly be due to placebo. After several days of tortuous e-mail dialogue and receiving what I considered to be unsatisfying responses to my penetrating questions, I finally had to give up and realize that there was nothing more we could say to one another. He had ceased responding to my

e-mails, so on February 24, 2004, I did a posting to the VT electronic mailing list about my experiment, which resulted in several attempts on the part of VT practitioners to explain away my results. It became obvious to me that I had reached the end of my journey with TFT. I decided it was time for me to go public with my results. First, I sent an e-mail to the algorithm trainers involved in the study because I thought it would be fair to notify them first. Apparently, one of the algorithm trainers forwarded my e-mail to Callahan because 2 days later I received a fax from the ATFT, saying that what I had written was a de facto resignation and asking for my formal resignation. On March 1, 2004, I formally resigned from the ATFT, making my split with Callahan official.

Before I had the chance to post a notice about my study to the TFTDx electronic mailing list, Callahan had me removed. He had no control, however, over my algorithm electronic mailing list, TFT-ALGO, which I own and moderate, so I posted an announcement there (Pignotti, 2004) that the purpose of the list had changed, explaining my experiment and the reasons for my break with Callahan. I also sent individual e-mails to as many people on the TFTDx list as I had addresses for, informing them of the situation. Fortunately, I was able to use TFT-ALGO, now an electronic mailing list with public archives, open to anyone who wishes to read it or join, as a forum through which to respond to Callahan and express my views. I invited TFT critics and proponents of TFT offshoots, such as EFT, to come onto the list, and for the first time we all had an open discussion. Not surprisingly, Roger and Joanne Callahan removed themselves from the TFT-ALGO electronic mailing list and now there is a new, members-only, official ATFT electronic mailing list. TFT-ALGO continues to operate as an open forum for the discussion of TFT, and anyone who wishes to read the archives for details on the dialogue that occurred there following my split with Callahan (mostly in March 2004) can access them in our public archives at (<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/TFT-ALGO/>). The content of these archives might be of interest to those who wish to better understand the views of those who are proponents of TFT and how they feel that they can continue to justify their beliefs in the face of contrary evidence. Only one other active VT proponent changed his mind as the result of my study. The others continue to practice and promote VT, making the same claims as always, although there are some who defected earlier for other reasons.

## WHAT I LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE

The first month after my split with Callahan and the weeks leading up to it were extremely difficult times for



me because I was processing my entire 7-year experience, reading what I had written in past discussions, and trying to come to terms with how in spite of my training in research I had gotten into such a state of mind that led me to endorse TFT and VT. I did eventually sort things out and after several months began to come to terms with what had happened. Several of the TFT critics and others in the evidence-based psychology and social work communities were very helpful to me during this time in taking the time to engage in discussions with me, for which I am very grateful.

An important way I have been able to take responsibility for my past mistakes was to write a retraction of my article in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (Pignotti, 2005a). Callahan responded to this retraction (2005) and I responded with a rejoinder (Pignotti 2005b). My VT study was published in *The Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice* (Pignotti, 2005c) and I also presented it at a *Society for Social Work and Research* conference (Pignotti, 2005d). In the fall of 2006, I entered a PhD Social Work program at Florida State University, with the ultimate goals of teaching (including educating people in evidence-based practice and understanding pseudoscience) and doing research, goals I originally had back in 1996, prior to becoming involved with TFT. My hope is that what I have learned through my experience with TFT will in some way be instructive to others and perhaps will help some clinicians and consumers ask questions when extravagant claims are made about untested novel therapeutic approaches.

Having now had 2 years to reflect on my experience with TFT, I realize that I made the choices I did even though I had a background in research and should have known better because I did not understand how compelling, convincing, and yet misleading personal and clinical experiences as a therapist can be. I also did not realize how vulnerable we all are to confirmation bias (Meehl, 1997) and attending to evidence that confirms our beliefs while explaining away that which does not. Apparently, I am not alone in this misunderstanding because Callahan himself has a strong research background, as do some of the other proponents of novel therapies who make unfounded claims based on anecdotal experiences. Nevertheless, such experiences should not be entirely discounted. First-hand experience can be very valuable in hypothesis generation and what Reichenbach (1938) referred to as the context of discovery. However, if we are going to have a scientific approach to clinical practice, we must move beyond the context of discovery, roll up our sleeves, and do the hard work of conducting well-designed research and follow the results of our data, wherever that leads us.

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