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Emotional Awareness and Expression Therapy (EAET)

Principles and Home Exercises for Chronic Pain & Symptoms

What Is EAET?

Emotional Awareness and Expression Therapy (EAET) is an evidence-based psychological treatment for chronic pain and symptoms. It is effective for primary pain conditions like fibromyalgia, chronic headaches, pelvic pain, and back pain without clear structural causes, and neuroplastic symptoms like irritable bowel syndrome, bladder syndromes, tinnitus and chronic dizziness.

EAET is based on the understanding that unresolved trauma, psychological stress, and interpersonal conflicts can trigger, worsen, or maintain chronic pain. Unlike traditional pain management approaches that focus on coping with pain, EAET aims to reduce or eliminate pain by helping you process the emotions and internal conflicts that may be driving your symptoms.

Core Principles of EAET

1. Pain and symptoms as brain-generated phenomena

Many chronic pain and symptoms, without a clear medical cause, are generated and maintained by the central nervous system—particularly the brain—rather than by damaged tissues or disease. Your pain and symptoms are real, but they may be reversible if you address the psychological factors contributing to it.

2. The role of avoided emotions

When difficult emotions—especially anger, but also sadness, guilt, shame, or fear—are suppressed or avoided, they can manifest as physical pain or other symptoms. Your brain may create symptoms as a danger signal in the face of feelings that seem too threatening or unacceptable to experience consciously.

3. Trauma and conflict as pain drivers

Past trauma, ongoing stressful relationships, and internal conflicts can perpetuate chronic pain. Addressing these issues directly is essential for recovery.

4. **Emotional processing leads to pain reduction**

When you become aware of, experience, and express avoided emotions in healthy ways—both in therapy, by journaling, and in real relationships—your brain no longer needs to create pain as a distraction. Many people experience substantial pain or symptom reduction or complete resolution through this process.

The Four Components of EAET

5. **Education:** Learning how stress, trauma, and emotions contribute to your pain
6. **Disclosure:** Talking or writing about traumas and psychological conflicts in your life
7. **Expression:** Experiencing and expressing avoided emotions, especially anger, sadness, and self-compassion
8. **Communication:** Learning to communicate your feelings and needs more effectively in real relationships

Home Exercises for Emotional Awareness and Expression

These exercises are designed to help you practice the skills of EAET between therapy sessions (or on your own if you don't have access to an EAET therapist). Approach them with curiosity and self-compassion—this work can bring up difficult emotions, and that's part of the healing process.

Exercise 1: Written Emotional Disclosure

Purpose: To explore and release emotions connected to past trauma or current stressors

Instructions:

- Set aside 20-30 minutes in a private space where you won't be interrupted.
- Write continuously about a stressful or traumatic experience from your past, or a current source of conflict or stress. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or making sense—just let your thoughts and feelings flow.
- Focus on how the experience made you feel (or makes you feel now). What emotions come up? Anger? Sadness? Fear? Shame? Allow yourself to really feel these emotions as you write.
- Write about how this experience or conflict has affected your life and your relationships.
- Repeat this exercise 3-4 times over the course of a week, either on the same topic or exploring different stressors.

Note: You may feel worse temporarily after writing (increased emotions or even pain). This is normal and often a sign that you're accessing important feelings. The benefits typically appear after several sessions of writing.

Exercise 2: Anger Expression Practice (Empty Chair)

Purpose: To experience and express anger that you've been suppressing

Instructions:

- Identify a person or situation that has caused you anger, resentment, or hurt (past or present).
- Sit in a private space and imagine that person sitting in an empty chair across from you.
- Speak out loud to the imagined person. Tell them how they hurt you, what you're angry about, what you wish had been different. Use your full voice, facial expressions, and body posture to express the emotion—don't hold back.
- Allow yourself to really feel the anger, hurt or resentment. It's okay to raise your voice, cry, use strong language, or feel intense emotion. This is a safe space to express what you've been holding in. Keep asking yourself, "what else?" until you feel really done with the emotion you were feeling.
- After expressing your strong emotion, what do you feel emotionally? Is it replaced by sadness? Or compassion? Notice how you feel in your body. Is there any shift in your pain or tension?

Note: This exercise is about experiencing and expressing emotion in a safe, private setting—not about confronting the person in real life (though EAET may later help you decide how to communicate with them if appropriate)

Exercise 3: Connecting Pain to Emotions

Purpose: To identify patterns between your emotional state and your physical symptoms

Instructions:

- When you notice pain or symptoms flaring, pause and ask yourself:
 - What was I just thinking about?
 - What situation am I in or about to face?
 - What emotion might I be avoiding right now? (Anger? Sadness? Fear? Shame? Guilt?)
 - Is there a stressor or conflict I'm not acknowledging?
- Write down your observations in a journal. Over time, you may notice clear patterns—for example, pain increases when you're about to see a particular person, or when you're suppressing anger.

Example: "My back pain spiked this morning. I realize I was dreading a phone call with my mother. I'm probably angry about how she criticizes my parenting, but I never let myself feel that anger."

Exercise 4: Self-Compassion Letter

Purpose: To practice kindness toward yourself and process painful emotions

Instructions:

- Think of a painful experience from your past where you felt hurt, ashamed, or alone.
- Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of a loving, compassionate friend or parent. What would you say to yourself about that experience? What comfort or validation would you offer?
- Acknowledge your pain, validate your feelings, and remind yourself that you deserved better.
- Read the letter out loud to yourself, allowing yourself to receive the compassion you're offering.

Example opening: "Dear [your name], I'm so sorry that happened to you. You were just a child, and you deserved to feel safe and loved. It wasn't your fault..."

Important Reminders

- **EAET can bring up intense emotions.** If you feel overwhelmed, it's okay to take a break. If it feels too overwhelming to engage in on an ongoing basis, consider working with a therapist trained in EAET.
- **Relief may not be immediate.** Many people need to engage in emotional processing multiple times, reminding themselves that their emotions are safe, before seeing significant pain reduction. Be patient with yourself.
- **Pain may temporarily increase.** As you access avoided emotions, your symptoms might initially worsen. This is often a sign that you're on the right track.
- **EAET works best for primary pain conditions.** If your pain is due to an injury or disease, EAET may still help with your pain or symptoms, but it may not eliminate symptoms entirely.