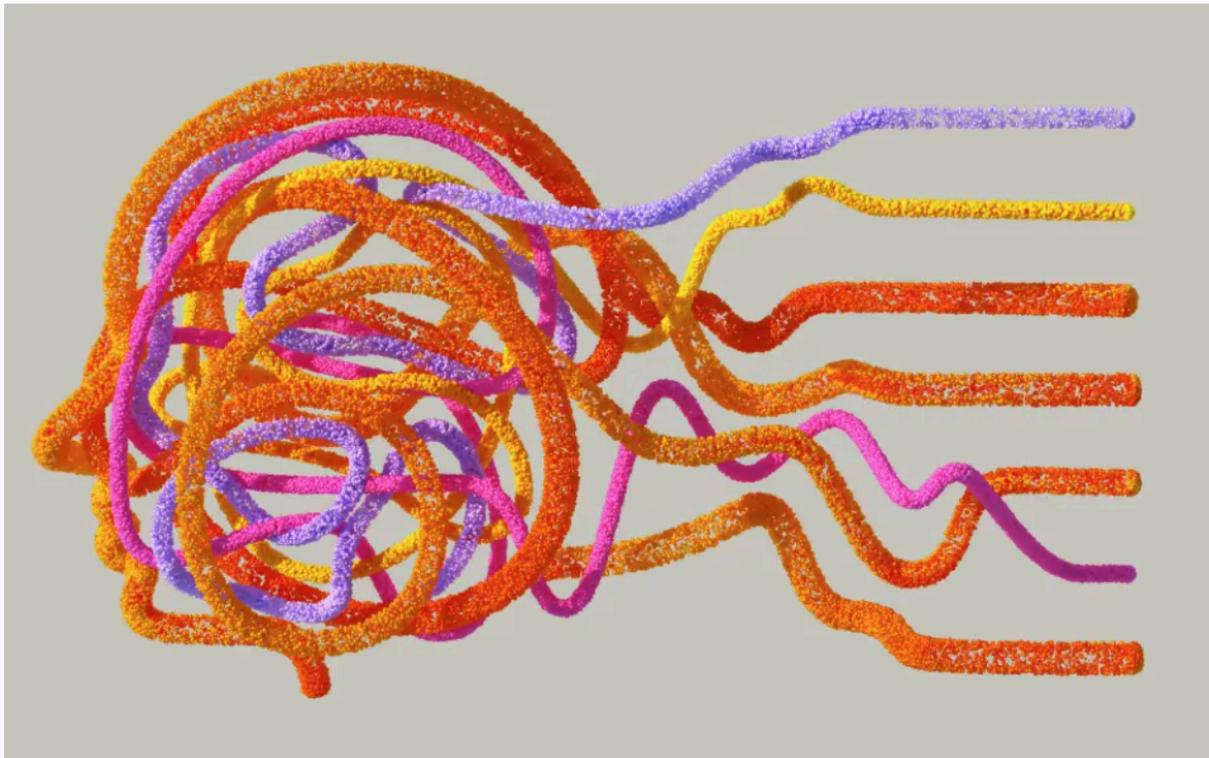


THINGS TO DO > LIFESTYLE

## Marin health psychologist develops emotional brain training



(Courtesy of Pexels)



By **LAUREL MELLIN**

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Whatever brings you — or your partner or child — into therapy, the world of mental health care is changing fast to respond to the extreme stress most of us are feeling now. A new psychotherapy, which directly targets the unconscious mind (“the stress brain”), gives people a way to switch off that stress and erase the stress overload circuits that cause it. Neuroscience

has shown that our health is not predicted by external stress but by how that stress activates stress overload circuits in our unconscious mind. Everyone has some of these triggering wires, but most people don't know that they are highly plastic. By organizing our self-care around erasing them, we have more direct control over our emotional and physical health, and, if we are in therapy, we can fast-forward our healing.

The approach of rewiring circuits is right for our times. Therapy is helpful, but stress happens anytime, and anywhere and the consequences can be serious. These stress wires dysregulate the three major centers in the brain that regulate our physiology and behavior: the stress center, the reward center and the metabolic center. Scientists estimate that at least 80% of chronic diseases and mental health problems are caused or worsened by our faulty stress circuits.

By learning how to rewire our own stress circuits, we can become more proactive in controlling our health and quality of life. Traditional therapy has focused on changing thoughts, behaviors and emotions and using drugs to alter biochemistry, as if they are separate silos. Neuroscience has shown that the brain doesn't operate that way. It responds in daily life by activating circuits that combine all four of them.

## Rewiring circuits

Shifting our therapeutic focus to targeting the errant stress circuits frees up both patient and therapist. In sessions, the patient identifies, weakens and transforms any circuit that blocks their capacity to feel vibrant and enjoy their life. This direct and empowering approach may not only give us a better chance of turning around our current state of mental and physical health but also open more people to entering therapy. At UCSF, my collaborators and I developed emotional brain training (EBT), a rewiring tool kit that is evidence-based. More than 500,000 people have already used it. Our aim is to empower people to directly rewire these errant circuits faster and have more lasting results.

The EBT tools are typically integrated with other therapies that are organized around diagnostic criteria —depression, anxiety and PTSD. However, based on neurophysiology, no matter what the diagnosis, it is caused or amplified by faulty stress circuits. So, beyond

prescribing medications, a unifying treatment is to guide patients in targeting and erasing their errant wires.

A therapist using EBT might say to a patient, “I’m sorry you are going through this, but the root cause is stress circuits. Let’s identify and rewire them one by one.”

That simple shift changes everything. It removes shame, gives patients a clear road map for change and points therapy directly toward erasing the root cause instead of chasing symptoms or addressing issues. By rewiring stress overload circuits, we balance physiology, which is the ultimate pathway to optimal health.

Given that our current health problems are stress diseases, this approach may be as revolutionary as the discovery of germs in the 1800s. Once we understood that the biologic root cause of infectious diseases was germs, sterilization and antibiotics changed medicine forever. Now, with a biologic root cause of our stress circuits identified as the hidden driver of today’s health crisis, tools for positive neuroplasticity can aim to erase faulty circuits and replace them with health-promoting wires. Our own wires serve as an internal “medicine chest” for preventing and treating most health problems.

## Bridging the gap

Although therapists apply EBT during sessions, part of this paradigm is to empower people to take control of their health based on brain science. Stress circuits can strike at any time, so to turn around our health crisis, people need to be empowered to use the tools independently between sessions, solo with family and friends or in community groups. To begin using EBT, here are some key ideas:

Stop blaming yourself when you feel bad. Instead, say, “It’s not me; it’s a wire.” The behavior, mood, impulse or thought that disturbs you is an activation of a wire encoded in your brain without your permission, often decades ago.

- Keep it simple. There are only two types of circuits. Some circuits are healthy and balanced, leaving us resilient. Others are these stress overload wires, which throw us into extremes, stalls and shutdowns. The goal is to transform the latter.

- Stop overthinking. Instead, harness the power of your emotions. Fundamentally, emotions are not psychological but biological powerhouses that, when processed with innovative techniques, switch off and rewire unwanted circuits.
- Complaining is essential. Start the erasing process by clearly stating what is bothering you. This causes the precise, problematic circuit causing your distress to unlock, opening it to erasure. Your beautiful emotional brain can do that quite naturally — something even a brain scan cannot do.
- Anger is good for us. Once you've pinpointed what bothers you, use a flash of healthy anger to deactivate that faulty circuit. Then briefly express sadness, fear and guilt to experience the emotional release you need. With practice, this takes two to three minutes. Emotions are fast.
- The payoff is joy. After processing your negative emotions, the brain naturally shifts to activating a healing wire. You will feel a surge of dopamine and the emotion of joy, which is the signpost of optimal physiology and exceptional functioning.
- Keep rewiring until you have optimal health. The best health insurance is a brain that is cleared of stress overload circuits and establishes a set point, or "default state," in optimal physiology. Continue rewiring until you achieve optimal health by raising your set point. The neuroscientific health goal: become wired for joy.

As the brain becomes more resilient, you may develop a new attitude toward stress and the nature of self-healing. Momentary stress is good for us, as it opens the door to rewiring and makes us sharper. If we shift from overthinking, release overcontrol and process our emotions with these innovative techniques, that stress will fall away — as will the stress-induced harmful chemicals and urges. Positive emotions will flow. With the tools of EBT, we can make the most of our stress, using it to boost our resilience and rely on rewiring to deliver a healthy biochemistry naturally, with less reliance on pharmaceuticals. Here's how EBT works in everyday life:

- Notice when you feel off — anxious, angry, down or overwhelmed.
- Remind yourself: This isn't me. It's a wire.
- Use the simple tools to process the emotions in short bursts — complaining for a moment, expressing anger safely, then moving through sadness, fear and guilt.

- Allow the circuit to shift. Within minutes, notice a surge of positive energy, relaxation and even joy. Those cravings and overreactions fade away.
- Repeat. Each use of the tools weakens faulty wiring, strengthens healthy circuits and helps to raise your set point.

The ultimate therapeutic goal: raising the brain's set point.

Over time, rewiring circuits becomes second nature. Just like brushing your teeth, you will integrate rewiring circuits not only into your therapy but also into your daily self-care routine.

This new era of positive neuroplasticity of the emotional brain doesn't erase the real benefits of traditional therapy, medications and lifestyle advice. The future of therapy is a dual model: on one side, treatments to manage symptoms and reduce suffering, while on the other, EBT to erase faulty wiring and rebuild brain circuits for resilience and joy. Imagine a health care system where patients are not just managed but empowered to reset their own wiring. That's the promise of this new paradigm.

Every major breakthrough in healthcare has come when we have identified the true biologic cause of suffering. When we discovered germs, we transformed medicine. Now, by pinpointing stress overload circuits as the cause of today's epidemics of emotional and physical problems, we stand at the dawn of another revolution.

In this new world of therapy, playing by the rules of rewiring stress circuits begins with awareness of the science of the emotional brain. Moments of stress are not bad for us. They are gateways to unlocking circuits, rewiring the brain and treating the root cause of chronic diseases and emotional health problems. A psychotherapist can help you rewire them, but ultimately each of us has to be present to our own internal state and choose to interrupt the extremes activated by these wires. The future of healthcare is to move beyond simple coping to rewiring. Not just managing symptoms but self-directed strengthening of our resilience. Not just surviving but learning how to create joy.

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