Helping Hands

The night after a Reiki session, one HIVer fell asleep without his usual pain meds for neuropathy.

June 1, 2000 By Diane Goldner

Every Tuesday, David Burke, massage coordinator for the Monterey County AIDS Project in California, sees clients in “the sugar shack,” a healing studio he built himself. He says he’s seen his PWA clients tolerate meds better, have more vitality, and even develop a more positive outlook on life. But Burke is not just giving a massage—he’s also providing Reiki. “It works on the body’s energy field,” he says, “and I believe in it.”

Reiki is a Japanese term meaning universal life energy. It’s one of dozens of forms of energy medicine—such as acupuncture, chi kung and hands-on healing—that are proliferating in the United States. Reiki is offered by volunteers at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York City, by nurses at Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital in Santa Cruz, California, and in complementary care centers at other hospitals nationwide. One transplant specialist at New York University Medical Center, Devon John, MD, even uses it to calm his patients and give them extra support.

Treatments are gentle. The client lies down first on his stomach and then on his back, and the practitioner lays hands on the chest, abdomen, head, upper and lower back, and finally the feet. To amplify and focus the Reiki energy, the practitioner may also visualize a series of Reiki symbols or even trace the symbol on the client’s body with the fingers or hand. Weekly or biweekly sessions usually cost $50 to $100, although some programs are free.

Reiki was developed by Mikao Usui, a 19th-century Japanese spiritual seeker of the healing methods that the Buddha and his disciples are said to have used.

As legend has it, Usui sought out Buddhist scholars and monks, learned Chinese and Sanskrit, and—poring over Sanskrit sutras—discovered formulas for accessing healing energy. At the end of a 21-day meditation, the symbols that Reiki practitioners now use were revealed to him. In turn, Hawayo Takata, a Japanese-American woman, brought Reiki from Tokyo to America in the 1930s.

Practitioners claim that Reiki can reduce stress and anxiety, help create emotional balance and increase energy. Those are big claims and hard to prove. Does it really work? The concept of a life force is common across cultures and epochs. But it contradicts the modern Western idea that a human being is a series of biochemical reactions. So far, no form of spiritual energy has been detected by scientific instruments. Nonetheless, many healing techniques based on that concept

have been found—some using control groups—to have both physical and emotional benefits (see “Like a Prayer,” April 2000). More research is under way at universities including Duke and Harvard.

Only two studies have been done on Reiki. Both measured whether the technique causes a physiological response rather than how it affects a specific ill. The first, published in Psi Research in 1985, measured whether a single Reiki practitioner performing a 30-second treatment on a person in a separate room could induce physical signs of relaxation. It found no significant result. (Psychiatrist Daniel Benor, MD, author of a review of energy-healing studies, questioned whether the allotted time was adequate.) The second study, published in 1989 in the Journal of Holistic Nursing, followed 48 adults before and after short-term Reiki training and found significant changes in their levels of hemoglobin (which carries oxygen throughout the body) compared to a control group. Hemoglobin levels were chosen as an example of physiologic effect, rather than as a measure of healing.

Still, those who have experienced Reiki generally enjoy it—and even believe it has health benefits. “It’s a miraculous experience, that Reiki,” says Doug Hails, a 50-year-old PWA who has received two years of treatments at the Monterey County AIDS Project. The night after a session, he says, he is able to fall asleep without the pain medication he normally takes for the neuropathy in his legs. Hails adds that during one treatment, he saw brilliant white light and, in several other healings, had the sensation of visits from his late mother and brother. As a result, he says, “I’ve lightened up on life, and I’m not afraid to die anymore. I know where I’m going after death: It’s a beautiful place. I get choked up.”

Reiki can be learned in a weekend workshop, although at least a year’s study is required to earn the title of master (teacher). Other forms of energy healing require years of training to direct energy to specific body parts (organs or cells) or energy channels (called meridians or chakras) that may be blocked. But with Reiki, practitioners say, the idea is that they surrender to, rather than direct, the energy. “It’s simple,” says Jeanine Sande, who has been teaching Reiki for more than a decade in Santa Cruz. “I’ve taught about 1,400 people—and no one can’t do it.”

That very simplicity at first led me to shy away from Reiki. So I was pleasantly surprised several years ago when a healer used the technique on me one morning after a troubled, sleepless night. My sick “hangover” feeling dissolved, plus I was able to go to sleep for a few hours and wake up totally refreshed. Another time I received a Reiki session from a friend, and though I can’t say I noticed any specific healing effect, afterward I felt deliciously relaxed.

So while more scientific data is needed, one thing is sure: Reiki certainly can’t hurt you. And who knows? Treatment from a sincere practitioner may well make your day brighter. But, of course, that’s not something that medical research is good at measuring anyway.

For more information or to find a Reiki practitioner, contact the Center of Living Light at 631.728.4173 or www.centeroflivinglight.org, or go to the site of the International Center for Reiki Training, www.reiki.org. You can also read the book , Essential Reiki *by Diane Stein Crossing*

Press/Freedom, CA).

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