Like A Prayer

Laying on of hands,“ focused intention” and other spiritual techniques are getting scientific support. Believe it or not.

April 1, 2000 By Diane Goldner

When I first witnessed hands-on healing, I was mystified. A physician had shown me a book, Hands of Light (Bantam), by former NASA scientist–turned–healer and teacher Barbara Ann Brennan. Skeptical but intrigued, I decided to investigate. I found that when a healer laid hands on someone, that person might experience a revelation, even burst into tears. How? Why? I knew if I placed my hands on the same person, nothing would happen. Healers alluded to all kinds of invisible forces from chakras and chi (“subtle energy” forces in the body) to emotional pain. To my mind, this was all a case of the emperor’s new clothes; I could neither see nor sense any of it. Still, a good reporter must keep an open mind and let the facts emerge.

The more I dug, the more I dug it. Ultimately, I spent four years investigating healing and even wrote a book, Infinite Grace: Where The Worlds of Science and Spiritual Healing Meet (Hampton Roads/Charlottesville, VA). It turns out that spiritual healing, including techniques used on behalf of another such as prayer, visualization, laying on of hands and focused intention, is one of the best-kept health secrets. So far, of the 177 studies that have been published—most in reputable peer-reviewed journals—three-quarters have shown beneficial results, according to psychiatrist Daniel Benor, MD.

Power of suggestion? Perhaps. But many of the studies involve mice, plants, bacteria or cells. If these can respond to suggestion, that’s big news. Some research even found effects from distant healing, when the healer is in a separate room—or even city—from the subject.

This approach was the focus of one recent and compelling study, published in the Western Journal of Medicine in December 1998. Elisabeth Targ, MD, head of psychosocial oncology at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, enrolled 40 people with end-stage AIDS, many with no CD4 cells. Half received long-distance healings six days a week for 10 weeks, and half served as a control group. Participants had no idea if they were receiving healing. The healers never met the patients—they were merely given each person’s photo, first name and lab statistics. The results? Compared to the control, PWAs who received healings had fewer—and less serious—illnesses (2 vs. 12), and fewer doctor visits (185 vs. 260) and hospitalizations (10 days vs. 65 days). The treated group also had markedly higher standardized mood scores.

What caused these dramatic results? There was no physical mechanism, and neither group showed a change in CD4 count. Even stranger, the most dramatic differences appeared only in the four months of monitoring after the actual healing period ended. The findings, Targ says, “may indicate something about the nature and power of our own intentionality—that we are more connected to others than we realize.”

When POZ’s Michael “Herb of the Month” Onstott volunteered for Targ’s study, he was losing weight and, he says, “my health was going in the wrong direction” (see “Beyond Belief,” POZ, April 1997). Several weeks into the study, he began his first protease-based drug combo, along with a full program of nutrient supplements, herbs and stress reduction. Shortly afterward, he experienced severe diarrhea, worsening Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS) and a dark depression. But within another month, he had a dramatic change in his attitude: “I began to be optimistic. I thought, ‘This is just a blip. It’s not going to go on and on.’ Unlike in the past, my depression lifted even while I still felt sick.” Then, suddenly, his health began to improve. He gained weight and the KS slowed down. Assuming that he was not in the treated group, Onstott attributed the turnaround to his new health regimen and his attitude adjustment. After the study ended, however, he was surprised to learn that he had been the focus of many long-distance healings. (Antiretrovirals, which were taken by equal numbers of control and treatment patients, cannot explain the difference in results, Targ says.) The effects of healing can be so subtle that they’re hard to track.

The first few times I had healings, I didn’t feel a thing, although afterward I was more relaxed. After a series of sessions, however, my chronic migraine headaches largely resolved, along with the anxiety and anger they had likely been covering. My reactions to myself and events also shifted: I found myself less wound up. Eventually, I was able to track what healers call “subtle energy,” and even to give healings to others. Subtle energy has not been directly measured by scientific instruments. But early studies show that during hands-on healing, the heart waves and brain waves of healers become more coherent, and the patient resonates with that shift.

Of course, those who roll their eyes at hands-on healing will hoot at the idea that a healer in Pittsburgh can affect a PWA in San Francisco. If Targ’s results had been achieved with a pill, they might have made headlines. But not a single newspaper or TV network reported this development. However, this hasn’t stopped some researchers. In December 1998, 40 scientists met for three days at Harvard University to discuss distant healing and other long-distance mental effects. Many scientists involved in this area, including Targ, believe that we are crossing a new scientific frontier. They postulate that healing may be just one example of the power of still-unmeasurable human capabilities such as intention, love and consciousness. The explanations of how consciousness works beyond time and space, goes the hypothesis, may lie in a new understanding of quantum physics.

As for me, I’m as intrigued as ever by energy healing and its implications. Of course, I no longer think it’s all simply a question of faith. Nor am I alone. So if you want to know more, there are plenty of us who will be glad to lend a hand.

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