

It doesn't look like much is happening. But people who receive the treatment report positive and sometimes striking results. I'm talking about Reiki, a healing treatment in the growing field of "energy medicine."

Proponents say that energy medicine techniques balance the subtle vibrational fields which are believed to surround and interpenetrate the human form. While the specifics of energy medicine are sometimes hazy, there is underlying supportive and plausible scientific theory. Fact is, our bodies are made up of cells that on a deeper level contain elementary particles that emit electromagnetic forces. On a micro level, our bodies are energy in motion. Some health futurists say that down the line most medicine will be noninvasive manipulations of our energy fields.

That being said, to what extent do we currently understand these forces? Can they be safely accessed and combined with conventional medical care?

To answer some of these questions, I spent an afternoon with Pamela Miles, a leading Reiki master who recently published the first mainstream book about Reiki ("Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide," Tarcher/Penguin 2006), suggesting that Reiki is catching on. I was impressed by Pamela's work in prestigious medical and university settings, which also reflects a sea change in attitudes toward integrating noninvasive, subtle therapies into conventional medicine.

Here is my interview with Pamela aimed at getting the basics of Reiki.

Question: Pamela, what is Reiki?

Pamela Miles: Reiki is a spiritual or vibrational healing practice that promotes balance on every level — body, mind and spirit. Reiki treatment is offered through noninvasive, light touch to a clothed recipient.

Q. Describe how a Reiki session proceeds.

PM: In a formal session, the recipient lies fully clothed on a treatment table, covered by a blanket if desired. Traditionally, the practitioner places hands lightly on the head and the front and back of the torso, with hand placements varying somewhat among different practitioners. Treatment usually lasts between 45 and 90 minutes, although in a hospital it is typically 15 to 20 minutes.

Q. What is its origin?

PM: Reiki practice began with the teachings of Mikao Usui in Japan in the early 1920s. One of his close students, Chujiro Hayashi, was a medical doctor retired from naval service. Hayashi simplified the healing practices and helped his student, Mrs. Hawayo Takata, bring Reiki to the U.S. in 1938. Reiki is now practiced throughout the world.

Q. How is Reiki related to spirituality?

PM: Reiki is a healing practice that enables people to access their own unique spirituality without dogma. Asian spirituality and medicine are intertwined; health is not seen as merely a lack of disease. Rather, spiritual development is valued as a cornerstone of overall health.

Q. How does Reiki compare or relate to other techniques that manipulate energy?

PM: Actually, Reiki practitioners do not manipulate or direct energy. They merely provide a connection through which the healing pulsations called Reiki activate spontaneously according to the need of the receiver. Reiki practitioners remain passive during treatment. Although Reiki is healing, it is not medicine in the sense that it is not directed toward a specific goal. No diagnosis is needed, and the treatment plan is the same for every condition. Reiki is much subtler than other energy techniques, more akin to meditation than to energy medicine, and could be thought of as applied meditation. The actual experience of Reiki is usually quite meditative.

Q. What can Reiki do for someone?

PM: Reiki is balancing, so it can theoretically help anyone in any situation. Since we all have our own ways of being unbalanced, the benefits of Reiki treatment are different for people at different times. But since we are usually unbalanced in the direction of stress, people commonly experience Reiki as stress-reducing, and there is increasing scientific evidence of this. Commonly reported benefits are improvements in sleep, digestion, mental clarity and overall well-being.

Q. What can't it do?

PM: Rather than say what Reiki can't do, I would caution people to use their common sense. In an emergency, if you are Reiki-trained, dial 911 with one hand and offer Reiki with the other. You can safely use Reiki with any medical intervention or during any medical procedure. If you are on medication, it's important to be monitored in case your need for medication changes. For example, diabetics often need less medication once they start receiving Reiki or practicing Reiki self-treatment.

Q. What evidence is there that Reiki works?

PM: A few of the small studies that have been done so far have showed promising results for using Reiki to reduce stress, anxiety and pain. The data include objective measures (decreased stress hormones, improved immune indicators, decreased [heart rate](#) and improved blood pressure) as well as subjective improvements in anxiety and pain. One study showed benefits to people being treated for depression, and the improvements held when the participants were tested a year later. The National Institutes of Health currently has five research projects studying Reiki's effect on stress, fibromyalgia, AIDS, prostate cancer, and diabetic neuropathy and coronary risk factors.

Q. Tell us about your successes in working with Reiki.

PM: I have created Reiki programs in prominent [New York City](#) hospitals. Several years ago, through the nonprofit Institute for the Advancement of Complementary Therapies, I created a funded program that offers Reiki to outpatients at St. Vincent Hospital's Comprehensive Cancer Center. The responses to our evaluation surveys are heartening. Approximately 95 percent of the patients who reported having anxiety or pain before receiving Reiki treatment said that their level of anxiety or pain was reduced after the treatment.

Q. How is it accepted in these settings?

PM: On the basis of absence of risk and strong anecdotal evidence, Reiki is increasingly accepted in conventional medical settings, and is offered at prestigious hospitals around the country, including Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and New York-Presbyterian Hospital (New York City), M.D. Anderson Cancer Center (Houston), George Washington University Hospital (Washington, D.C.), California Pacific Medical Center (San Francisco), [Dana-Farber Cancer Institute](#) (Boston) and Yale/New Haven Hospital (New Haven, Conn.). I have created five Reiki programs in prominent New York City hospitals and have published a Reiki review paper in the peer-reviewed medical journal *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* (March 2003).

Q. How do conventional physicians react to Reiki?

PM: My experience has been very positive and rewarding. When Reiki is explained without making claims in language that is meaningful to physicians, they quickly see how valuable it can be for their patients and to themselves. Reiki can relieve anxiety and pain and strengthen a patient's sense of well-being that is deeper than the disease. When patients feel better, they function better and are more likely to follow their medical protocols. Although chemotherapy kills the cancer cells, Reiki can be the therapy that enables a patient to stay healthy enough to receive the full course of treatment and make other needed lifestyle changes. Reiki can help a patient turn a life challenge into a healing passage.

Q. Can anyone do Reiki?

PM: People of any age or state of health, who have the interest, can learn to practice in a class taught by a qualified Reiki master. The degree of competence developed will depend on how diligently the student practices. I have taught parents and young children — the children are often the ones to remind their moms of Reiki when there's a kitchen accident or family illness. My oldest student was a Holocaust survivor in her early 90s. Reiki's soothing touch is useful to people at every stage of life.

Q. What training is required?

PM: You can only learn to practice Reiki from a qualified Reiki master. This is not a practice to be learned from a book or the Internet. I wrote my book about Reiki not to teach people how to practice but to help them understand the benefits of Reiki, and to provide guidance in finding a credible local practitioner. I also emphasize the importance of practicing consistently for learning self-treatment. First-degree practice is facilitated by light touch and is best learned in approximately eight to 12 hours of in-person class time. Other levels of practice require additional training.

Q. Can Reiki be self-administered?

PM: Definitely. Reiki is equally effective in self-treatment or when received from someone else, regardless of one's state of mental or physical health. I started teaching people with AIDS at Gay Men's Health Crisis in [New York](#) City in the early 1990s and have trained people facing a wide range of other conditions, including cancer, fibromyalgia, heart disease, insomnia, panic attacks, epilepsy, diabetes, irritable bowel, depression, bipolar disorder, and recovery from surgery, injury, and abuse or trauma. Although Reiki can help people with any medical condition, it's wise to start using Reiki while one is still healthy to help strengthen well-being rather than wait for disease to strike. But when there is a medical condition, learning Reiki self-treatment can enhance well-being, reduce side effects of medication, and speed recovery. Reiki provides an easy transition to a more healthful lifestyle.

Q. Any dangers?

PM: Reiki has no known medical contraindications and can be safely combined with any medical or complementary therapy. I have administered Reiki during birth, at death, and in just about every intervening situation. Especially when arduous medical treatment is needed to address serious illness, Reiki can help care for the person while physicians focus their attention on the disease. However, since there is no standardization in Reiki training or treatment, it's wise to question a Reiki practitioner before signing up for treatment or training with someone who claims to be a Reiki professional.

Q. What questions should be posed to a practitioner?

PM: Ask about the practitioner's training (with whom, how long, when) and experience (how many years, in what settings). Ask what the treatment will be like — it should be gentle touch primarily to the head and torso while you are fully clothed and lying or sitting comfortably. Beware a practitioner who makes promises or offers a diagnosis.

Prior to the interview, I received a Reiki treatment from Pamela and her assistant. It was a pleasant, relaxing and meditative 45 minutes. I definitely felt energized and renewed afterward. I can't attest to any lasting effects, since it was one treatment. But I think it's worth experiencing and learning more about Reiki. My guess is Reiki will get increasing attention in the coming years.

You can read excerpts from Pamela Miles' book "REIKI: A Comprehensive Guide" (Tarcher/Penguin) at www.ReikiInMedicine.org
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Pamela Miles is a Reiki master practicing since 1986 who has over 30 years experience as a clinician, educator, writer and researcher in holistic health. Pamela has instituted Reiki programs at prominent New York City hospitals, published in peer-reviewed medical journals, collaborated on medical research, and taught First degree Reiki at medical schools. She is the author of *REIKI: A Comprehensive Guide*—the first mainstream book on the practice—and is frequently featured discussing Reiki in the media, including *The Dr. Oz Show* and *Allure* magazine. Her private practice is based in NYC.

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