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For Patients With Dementia, Hands-On Comfort

By [PAULA SPAN](#)

You can see the logic. Old people with dementia can become frightened and restless, angry or agitated. [Reiki, a Japanese healing practice](#) that supposedly channels a universal energy, is said to be soothing and deeply relaxing. So why not offer Reiki to elderly dementia patients?

[Home Care Partners](#), a nonprofit home care agency in Washington, won a two-year grant from the federal Administration on Aging to give it a try and has just finished training 36 aides in Reiki. Next year, the agency will offer Reiki training to family caregivers and to workers at adult day programs.

“It relieves stress, it reduces anxiety and it can help diminish pain,” said Marie Muller, the agency’s education manager and a trained Reiki master. “We hope that our clients with dementia who become agitated and stressed will find Reiki calming” — and thus will be less disturbed when aides help them bathe or dress or eat.”

Even at this early point, Ms. Muller said, aides are beginning to see benefits. One reported that Reiki, which involves gently placing hands on a patient’s clothed body (or just above it) in prescribed positions, was helping a client with painful arthritis. “She could feel the warmth, and her knees hurt her less,” Ms. Muller said. “The aide could observe her walking better.”

Scores of hospitals are also believers. At Portsmouth General Hospital in New Hampshire, for instance, two staff practitioners and a half dozen volunteers offer free Reiki to all patients, family members and staff, last year providing more than 2,100 sessions.

“People say they just feel comforted,” said Christina Niles, the hospital’s Reiki director, citing patient surveys. “I personally believe Reiki is healing. Not everyone at the hospital agrees, but everyone thinks that people feel better afterward.”

The fly in this particular ointment: scant credible evidence of effectiveness. “There hasn’t been adequate research done to draw any kind of conclusion about whether Reiki works or not — or even, from a scientific standpoint, what Reiki is,” said Dr. Nassim Assefi, an internist in Seattle who researches alternative medicine.

Most studies of Reiki have obvious flaws: the numbers of patients are too low, or the experiment isn’t randomized or blinded — meaning that patients seek Reiki out (and thus are

more likely to believe it's beneficial) and know what they're getting. The aides at Home Care Partners will fill out surveys reporting changes they observe in their clients receiving Reiki, but without controls that, too, is a subjective measure.

One of the few rigorous, controlled, randomized and blinded studies — the gold standard in Western medicine — was Dr. Assefi's own, involving [100 middle-aged fibromyalgia patients](#) in Seattle. Whether they were randomly assigned to standard hands-on treatment by a Reiki master, to "distant" Reiki in which the master focused "healing intention" from two feet away, or to fake Reiki from an untrained actor who mimicked the positions, the results were the same: no significant improvement of symptoms after eight weeks of twice-weekly treatments.

Yet Dr. Assefi — who has trained in Reiki and acupuncture, among other alternative therapies — said that her own patients love Reiki.

One could debate whether it makes sense to promote an Eastern therapy when Western research methods fail to document its value. "What do you do when the science isn't really there?" Dr. Assefi mused. "Should it be covered by insurance? Should we spend money on it?" The grant to Home Care Partners, for instance, comes to \$250,000 over two years.

But it's also true, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (part of the National Institutes of Health) that the practice appears safe, with no serious side effects reported. If Reiki can calm people suffering from dementia, regardless of whether the effect is measurable, maybe it's a good addition to a caregiver's toolbox.

If you've tried Reiki, or an elder friend or relative has, I'd like to hear about your experience.

Meanwhile, Ms. Muller, who has used Reiki to reduce cancer patients' nausea and fatigue and whose own 90-year-old mother appreciates it, is anticipating happy results. "Each person will respond in a different way," she said. "But we're really hopeful that we'll see some positive effects."

[Paula Span](#) is the author of *"When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions."*
