

Military and VA Using Reiki to Heal Returning Veterans



General Opinion

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The Department of Veterans Affairs [uses reiki](#) in their Hepatitis C treatment program. Fort Bliss' Warrior Resilience program -- the same one Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey [believes](#) should be replicated throughout the military -- uses it as one tool to help soldiers strengthen and recover following combat.

Military OneSource's Health Library [says](#) it can increase wellness and "treat diseases of all types."

And it's the reason [given](#) by New Zealand's champ cyclist Hayden Roulston for bouncing back from a serious heart condition to claim both Olympic silver and bronze medals this past week in Beijing.

What is Reiki [pronounced "Ray-Key"] ? Energy healing...

While I've heard of it in the past (in fact, I have a sister who is a Reiki Master and had used the touch therapy in her past massage therapy practice), it seems to be bubbling up to the mainstream surface more and more these days. That the military and VA are incorporating it, is another positive sign that mountains can be moved even in mammoth bureaucracies -- as long as you believe it can be so (and add a little action into the mix to help it along).

In light of the military and VA's embrace of Reiki and other energy treatments like Qigong and distance healing, I asked an email correspondent if she would educate me a bit on this sometimes hard-to-understand (or even believe) form of complementary therapy making its way into the military ranks.

First step:

Just for today, do not anger.

Just for today, do not worry.

Be humble.

Be honest in your work.

Be compassionate to yourself and others.

-- *Mikao Usui (1865-1926), founder of Reiki*

Reiki is a biofield therapy said to reduce tension and stress while promoting self-awareness and healing. It is considered complementary health care, i.e., valuable as an addition to, not substitute for, traditional health care. Here's what the VA has to say about Reiki on their [National Hepatitis C Program page](#):

Energy healing Energy healing is based on the concept that the human body is surrounded by various kinds of energy fields--electrical, magnetic, and subtle. In this healing-based tradition, practitioners are consciously aware of their client's imbalances of energy, and claim they can alter it to improve the overall sense of well being for their clients. The concept that unseen energy flows through and around all living things is a

belief that comes from many cultures since ancient times.

Conventional medicine concerns itself with health on a very physical and cellular level. Viewing the body as having other dimensions requires a shift in thought. The concept of subtle energy fields continues to have slow acceptance into our traditional, Western medical approach. ...

Reiki

Reiki is [a] type of energy healing. The Reiki practitioner's hands are either lightly touching the patient's body or are held slightly over it. Energy is thought to flow through areas most in need of healing. In Reiki, the energy is thought to come from the Universe, and the practitioner helps to transfer this positive, healing energy to the recipient. The concept is bizarre to some, but people who receive Reiki often have positive experiences.

Practitioners claim Reiki can aid in healing at a physical, emotional and mental level. Most recipients of Reiki report a peaceful sense of relaxation, and some people have reported reduction in pain, anxiety, fear and anger. There is no scientific evidence to confirm the effectiveness of Reiki.

The federal National Institutes of Health is funding research on energy healing therapies.

Not only is the NIH funding research into Reiki, so is the U.S. Army, [doling out](#) \$4 million to research more holistic ("whole picture") mind-body-spirit treatment methods including spiritual ministry, transcendental meditation, yoga and bioenergy therapies.

While the VA says there is "no scientific evidence to confirm the effectiveness of Reiki," it's not for lack of trying [[a partial list](#)]. But, overall, the reasons for the difficulty in measuring the therapy's efficacy stem from a variety of present-day research hurdles. One is the difficulty of testing Reiki's treatment dosage in double-blind clinical trials and determining the results that might follow within today's current scientific framework.

From "Reiki – Review of a Biofield Therapy History, Theory, Practice, and Research" [[pdf](#)] in the March/April 2003 issue of *Alternative Therapies*:

Biofield therapies, including Reiki, are generally accepted as low-risk interventions. The widespread use of these therapies, coupled with anecdotal evidence of efficacy, indicate a need for further study of this important category of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

Because of their foundation in subtle energies that as yet lie beyond technology's ability to consistently measure, biofield therapies present a special research challenge. ...

"[An Integrative Review of Reiki Touch Therapy Research](#)" by Anne Vitale MSN, APRN, BC, appeared in the July/August 2007 issue of *Holistic Nursing Practice*; it reviews some of the latest clinical Reiki studies and further explains the difficulty in testing its results in a clinical setting:

Reiki is an ancient energetic healing practice believed to have originated thousands of years ago in the Tibetan Sutras, and then lost, to be renewed in the 1800s by Dr Mikao Usui, a Japanese monk.³ **In recent years, professional nursing is a leading discipline**

in the exploration of the benefits of Reiki.

Nurses and others report clinical observations that the use and practice of Reiki has relaxation effects, stress management benefits, lessens pain, and promotes inner healing, however, with little empirical evidence on just how it works.^{21,25–31} **Within the last 10 years, the use of Reiki has increased among nurses and others, such as physicians, and rehabilitation therapists** who practice this modality in patient care in hospitals, hospice care settings, emergency departments, psychiatric settings, nursing homes, operating rooms, family practice, and many other settings.^{21,32} ...



Confusion in what constitutes credible CAM explorations and the lack of empirically based investigations is a common criticism challenging Reiki use within our Western, allopathic model of healthcare. **The field of energy research does not readily lend itself to traditional scientific analysis or strictly linear research methods because paradoxical findings are common.** ...

Entwined in this debate is the issue of whether the randomized controlled trial design considered the “criterion standard” in medical research is the optimal methodology for capturing the efficacy of energy work. ... [W]hen planning randomized controlled trial investigations to evaluate subtle energy work such as Reiki, **it is difficult to know whether sham Reiki used in placebo controlled trials is truly inert or just another confounding research variable.**⁴⁴ According to Shiflett et al³⁷ and Lee,⁵² benign touch may have treatment effects beyond placebo, which was discussed in early Reiki research recommendations presented by Wirth and Barrett,⁴⁸ Dressin and Singg,⁴⁵ and others.

Vitale touches on the second large research hurdle: Whatever Reiki's benefits may or may not be, how can one know if the results are due solely to the energy work itself? What if the “placebo effect” is what's really operational here? Gregg Braden discusses the potent power of this effect in his book [“The Spontaneous Healing of Belief: Shattering the Paradigm of False Limits”](#):

In May 2004, a group of scientists at Italy's University of Turin Medical School conducted **an unprecedented study investigating the power of belief to heal in a medical situation.** It began with administering drugs that mimic dopamine and relieve patients' symptoms [the patients were suffering from Parkinson's Disease].

It's important to note here that the drugs have a short life span in the body and their effects last only about 60 minutes. As they wear off, the symptoms return. Twenty-four hours later, the patients underwent a medical procedure where they *believed* that they would receive a substance to restore their brain chemistry to normal levels. In reality, however, they were given simple saline solution that should have had no effect on their condition.

Following the procedure, electronic scans of the patient' brains showed something that's nothing short of a miracle. Their brain cells had responded to the procedure *as if* they'd been given the drug that originally eased their symptoms. Commenting on the remarkable nature of the study, the team's leader, Fabrizio Benedetti, [stated](#), “It's the first time we've seen it [the effect] at the single neuron level.”

The University of Turin findings supported studies that had been conducted earlier by a team at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. In that investigation, it was reported that placebos could actually raise the brain levels of dopamine in the patients who receive them. Linking his studies to the earlier ones, Benedetti speculated that "the changes we ourselves observed are also influenced by release of dopamine." [pages 43-44]



Reiki practitioners, however, are clear about one thing: Their clients don't necessarily have to **believe** that the treatment will work (although having any negativity towards it may "block" its healing properties); therefore, it's not merely the placebo effect here that's doing the healing. Patients simply need to be open to the therapy; the energy will do the rest, they say.

"People can think themselves sick, and they can think themselves well," my Reiki Master sister says. "The mind can get in the way of or assist with our healing."

Another element to ponder: Today's research methods don't allow us to scientifically prove the existence of God, for example, yet many Americans wholeheartedly believe in the presence of such a being or force in their lives. Perhaps our present limited logic- or mind-based methods for testing such things might also fall short in testing Reiki's spiritual energy realm as well.

But the studies continue (see [NIH-supported clinical trials](#), which are currently recruiting patients to test the efficacy of Reiki, including distant Reiki). A few examples from [The Reiki Center](#):

- [Autonomic Nervous-System-Changes During Reiki Treatment: A Preliminary Study](#). The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine Volume 10, Number 6. This study revealed a **significant reduction in diastolic blood pressure and heart rate in the Reiki group** that didn't appear in the placebo group or the control group, thus tending to indicate that Reiki created an important effect that was not caused by suggestion.
- Both hands-on and distant Reiki treatments resulted in **statistically-significant decrease in the symptoms of psychological depression and self-perceived stress**, and the treatments had the long-term effect [Shore, A.G., "Long-term effects of energetic healing on symptoms of psychological depression and selfperceived stress", Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine].
- The nature of psychological effects arising during a Reiki session were studied, and **anxiety was shown to reduce after treatments** [Wardell, D.W., Engebretson, J., "[Biological correlates of Reiki touch healing](#)", J. Advanced Nursing].
- Certain **physiological changes were associated with receiving Reiki treatments, including decrease in systolic blood pressure, increase in salivary IgA levels and decrease in salivary cortisol** after treatments, increase in skin temperature and decrease in electromyographic activity during treatments [Engebretson, J., Wardell, D.W., "[Experience of a Reiki session](#)", Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine].

But let's jump back a bit to the beginning and lay a foundation to our exploration into Reiki energy healing itself. What's it all about? First, a look at the human energy field from Dr. Caroline Myss' book, "[Anatomy of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Power Healing](#):"



Everything that is alive pulsates with energy and all of this energy contains information. While it is not surprising that practitioners of alternative or complementary medicine accept this concept, **even some quantum physicists acknowledge the existence of an electromagnetic field generated by the body's biological processes.** Scientists accept that the human body generates electricity because living tissue generates energy. ...

Practitioners of energy medicine believe that the human energy field contains and reflects each individual's energy. It surrounds us and carries with us the emotional energy created by our internal and external experiences -- both positive and negative. This emotional force influences the physical tissue within our bodies. **In this way your biography -- that is, the experiences that make up your life -- becomes your biology.** [pages 33-34]

Recent research backs this connection up.

For example, veterans suffering with PTSD (a psychological/internal condition) are at a higher risk for [heart disease](#) (a physical/external condition). [Even stressed military kids with a deployed parent have been found to suffer higher [blood pressure and heart rates](#).] And veterans with PTSD also have more [autoimmune diseases](#) such as arthritis and psoriasis, and a strong link between PTSD and [asthma](#) and [migraines](#) has also been found.

One more powerful example of this internal energy/external outcome link: Those diagnosed with PTSD have a physically detectable, [smaller hippocampus](#) -- the region of the brain tasked with storing and retrieving memories -- than people without PTSD.

Another portion from Myss' book:

Positive and negative experiences register a memory in the cell tissue as well as in the energy field. As neurobiologist Dr. Candace Pert has proven, **neuropeptides -- the chemicals triggered by emotions -- are thoughts converted into matter.** Our emotions reside physically in our bodies and interact with our cells and tissues. ...

As Dr. Pert said on Bill Moyers' "Healing and the Mind, ..." **Your mind is in every cell of your body.** Moyers: "...You're saying that my emotions are stored in my body?" Pert: "Absolutely. You didn't realize that? ...There are phenomena that we can't explain without going into energy." ...

[E]ach area of the body transmits energy on a specific, detailed frequency, and when we are healthy, all are "in tune." ...This way of interpreting the body's energy is sometimes called "vibrational medicine." It resembles the most ancient medical practices and beliefs, from Chinese medicine to indigenous shamanic practices to virtually every folk or alternative therapy. [pages 35-36]



Let's look at another recent study having to do with the neuropeptides Dr. Pert mentioned above.

Just last year, researchers [studying](#) soldiers going through Ft. Bragg's survival training program were able to "identify a specific brain chemical that appears to influence how well you'll perform under stress and how emotionally resilient you'll be after a critical incident. The more you have of this powerful ingredient...the better off you'll likely be when your life is on the line."

What's the ingredient? Neuropeptide Y (NPY).

We can see, then, that stress and the internal thinking that drives it can do a lot of good -- or it can do a lot of damage not only to our mind, but our body as well. Those coping with PTSD and TBI have an understandable amount of negative energy coursing through their systems due to their past and present trials and experiences. Enter Reiki as one element to combat that gradual erosion of internal energy and external health.

According to some Reiki practitioners, Reiki provides deep relaxation, heals and releases mental and emotional stress, relieves aches and pains, quickens the healing process, works on the causal level of disease, reduces discomfort from surgery, helps reduce depression, and rebalances the system, creating clear mindedness and greater mental and physical balance.

While this seems to be the stuff of science fiction, quantum physics research is proving that such miraculous possibilities do exist in our world on a particle level.

So, why not on a human level, too?

Again, from Braden's "The Spontaneous Healing of Belief":

In recent years, scientists have developed the technology that has made it possible to document the strange and sometimes miraculous behavior of the quantum energy that forms the essence of the universe and our bodies. For example:

- [Quantum energy](#) can exist in two very different forms: as visible particles or invisible waves. The energy is still there either way, just making itself known in different forms.
- A quantum particle can be in one place only, two places at once, or even many places simultaneously. The interesting thing, however, is that **no matter how far apart these locations appear to be physically, the particle acts as if it's still connected.**
- Quantum particles can communicate with themselves at different points in time. They're not limited by the concepts of the past, present, and future. To a quantum particle, then is now and there is here.

These things are important because **we're made of the same quantum particles that can behave miraculously when given the right conditions.**

This is all cutting-edge stuff, only now being revealed through scientific experiments over the past decade. So, if you haven't heard any of this before, don't worry...you're not alone. It is a bit of a mind-bender, and I certainly don't have it all down pat, either (then again, neither do the scientists).

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About the Author:



Ilona Meagher is an author ([Moving a Nation to Care: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and America's Returning Troops](#)) and citizen journalist with ePluribus Media, as well as editor of [PTSD Combat: Winning the War Within](#). Her collaboration with ePluribus Media has resulted in the [PTSD Timeline](#) -- a database of reported OEF/OIF PTSD incidents -- as well as, with D.E. Ford, the 3-part series [Blaming the Veteran: The Politics of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) and with cho, [The Corroding Effect](#) and [What was Asked of Us](#). A journalism student at Northern Illinois University, winning the 2008 Illinois Journalist of the Year Award-Student Scholarship, Ilona recently [testified](#) before Congress on Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suicide.

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