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What Is Reiki? And Does It Actually Work?

Reiki is an energy-healing practice that many people describe as deeply calming and therapeutic – but it shouldn't be used in place of conventional treatments





By Melissa Evans Persensky

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Maybe you've heard of Reiki but aren't sure it's right for you. Maybe you're considering Reiki but aren't sure what it's all about. Maybe your doctor has suggested it as a form of therapy alongside your other medical treatments.

Or maybe you're just curious: *Is Reiki for real?*

It's a legitimate question. One that I had, too.

A quick internet search might lead you to think that Reiki is a scientifically proven technique. Or a bunch of pseudo-scientific quackery. It just depends on which link you click.

The idea that you can feel better physically and emotionally just by having someone hovering their hands over you can sound less like real medical advice and more like a snake oil salesman.

But Reiki is used in legit medical centers across the United States and around the world. That might lead you to believe that there must be some agreed-upon understanding that unblocking your energy with Reiki can do ... something. Right? Not necessarily.

So, like any good healthcare content writer, I did what I know. I interviewed healthcare providers. Dug into the research. Even had a Reiki session myself.

Chances are the legitimacy of Reiki will long be a topic of debate for the foreseeable future. But here's what science and I know for now.

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What is Reiki?

Reiki has roots in ancient Japanese healing practices and is considered a form of energy healing. It stems from the Japanese words “rei,” meaning universal, and “ki,” meaning vital life force energy.

The theory is that a Reiki master (a practitioner trained in Reiki) can channel the “universal life force energy” to you. They say they do this by either lightly placing their hands on you or by hovering them just above you, using a series of hand positions. Some people will call these techniques:

- Centering
- Clearing
- Beaming
- Smoothing the aura

Reiki masters say they don't create energy or give their energy to you. Rather, they say they act as a “conduit” for the universal life force energy that exists around us.

that scientists agree even exists.

Universal life force energy

The practice of Reiki relies on the existence of universal life force energy. But believing in that concept can take a leap of faith.

Reiki master Vickie Bodner, LMT, shares that in her view, we all have examples of how energy flows through us.

“Think about sitting in a room alone,” she illustrates. “Your partner walks into the room without you knowing it. They don’t make a sound, but you can *feel* they’re there. That’s their energy.”

Or in my case, maybe energy is what makes me jump to attention when my kindergartener is having a restless night. Maybe it’s her energy that alerts me to her presence – waking me to find those big, brown eyes staring me down in my sleep.

Cultures around the world have similar philosophies dating back centuries. [Traditional Chinese medicine](#) has the concept of qi, a vital life force energy that flows through living things. Indian philosophy offers the concept of prana, a life-giving energy force that flows through your [chakras](#).

But scientifically speaking, there’s no hard data to suggest that any form of healing energy exists.

“Proponents of Reiki describe that the mechanism by which it works is the transmission of a ‘universal life force energy.’ I don’t know what ‘universal life force energy’ is. Nor is there any evidence of such being involved in

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It could be that modern scientific understanding doesn't yet have the tools or methods to identify something like universal life force energy. Maybe it's something like dark matter. We think it's out there. We have reason to believe in it. We just haven't yet found a way to prove it.

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Or maybe it doesn't exist. And that would mean that the entire foundation on which Reiki is built would be shaky at best.

Potential health benefits of Reiki

People turn to Reiki and other energy-healing practices for all kinds of reasons. The idea driving Reiki is that channeling the universal life force energy and encouraging its movement through your body can help to create a healthier environment within your body and mind.

That's supposed to lead to a range of health benefits. Because the theory

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Essentially, people use Reiki to get their energy juices flowing. And fans of the practice say it can help with things like:

- Better sleep
- Reduced anxiety
- Boosted mood
- Reduced pain
- Increased energy
- Improved blood circulation

Research vs. personal experience

But is Reiki real? Do people really get big health benefits from it?

That's up for debate. Because the benefits of Reiki haven't been proven by rigorous scientific research.

But that doesn't mean it can't be effective for some people. It also doesn't mean that Reiki is necessarily appropriate as a medical treatment for everyone.

Sure, Reiki has been studied. But the research that has been done on Reiki isn't of the kind of quality that makes it accepted in mainstream medical circles.

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For example, researchers in [one study](#) suggest that Reiki can improve symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve quality of life in people in palliative care (that is, end-of-life care).

Promising? Yes. But can we use that as evidence to claim people who aren't nearing the end of life will have similar experiences? Not reliably.

A [review of research suggests Reiki can relieve pain](#). But the studies reviewed totaled a small sampling – just 212 people. And the researchers relied on people describing their perception of their pain before and after Reiki. (*How does it feel on a scale of 1 to 10?*) Such a subjective measure can be easily influenced. If you think Reiki is going to improve your pain, you're more likely to report that it did. That's just human nature – a [placebo effect](#).

One other study, described as a "[large-scale effectiveness trial of Reiki](#)" asked 99 Reiki practitioners across the United States to invite their clients to take a survey of how they felt before and after a treatment. The results? Improvements in mood, less nausea, better breathing and improved all-around well-being.

But let's break that down a bit. The practitioners asked their clients to

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People who most likely have continued to have Reiki sessions because they've found it to be beneficial. As far as scientific measurements go, that's far from an impartial sample.

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That said, scientific results aren't everything. There's the personal experience side to consider, too. Because even if research doesn't prove the benefits of Reiki to be empirically valid, personal experience still does count for something.

"There are only so many things you can study in randomized, controlled studies in order to understand the totality of what is likely to happen," Dr. Saper explains. "I think it's critical that we as healthcare professionals listen to our patients and validate their experiences, even if their experiences may run counter to one's own experience and training."

In other words, science may not prove that Reiki harnesses a universal life

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you try it and you feel better, sleep better and live a better life ... that's still worth paying attention to. Regardless of what science says (or doesn't say).

What happens during a Reiki session

As my research alone couldn't tell me what to expect from Reiki, I put on my comfy pants and headed to Bodner's office to try it myself.

People perform Reiki sessions in all kinds of places — medical offices, hospitals, homes, yoga studios, wellness centers and so on. Some even claim to be able to “send” Reiki long distance. So, no need for a physical meeting place for them.

Bodner, who's also a licensed massage therapist, practices in person. She works out of a Cleveland Clinic integrative medicine office, alongside other Reiki practitioners and healthcare professionals like chiropractors and acupuncturists.

We started with a quick chat typical of a healthcare appointment:

- **Demographics:** 38 years old. White. [Female](#). Married. Mom of two.
- **Medications:** [Multivitamin](#) and [antihistamines](#) for those doggone seasonal allergies.
- **Current ailments:** Lower back pain that's been flaring on and off for the past few months. Current pain level on a scale of 1 to 10? A blissful 2.
- **Medical history:** Five-year cancer survivor with an amputated right

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I'm no stranger to a nice, relaxing [massage](#) and recognized the room as what you see at a typical spa. Massage table. Dim lights. Soft music. The table was warmed to a comfortable temperature and Bodner placed a firm bolster pillow under my lower legs. I removed my shoes, but unlike a massage, I otherwise stayed fully dressed. (Score one for Reiki, in my book.)

I lay on my back, closed my eyes and tried to relax. Bodner started near my feet. No foot massage here. More like just cradling my heels with a soft hold.

I didn't feel the calm immediately. In fact, I felt like my mind was racing.

She held my feet for a few minutes. And my thoughts spiraled. *Is it working? Why isn't anything happening? Maybe I'm doing it wrong. You need to relax. NOW.*

From there she moved to my knees. Again, nothing more than just putting her hands on them. No rubbing. No kneading. Just a gentle touch.

And I still felt no different.

Bodner then gently placed her hands on the sides of my hips. That's when I started to think there may be something to this. Where I'd had a nagging ache in my lower back, the muscles started to flutter. Subtly. Comfortably. It was a new sensation that took me by surprise.

It was at that point that a wave of relaxation washed over me. And it was unlike anything I've felt before.

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I've dabbled in meditation and enjoyed the calming effects. I've tried out some beginner's breathing techniques and recognize how a few rounds of box breathing can calm the system.

But this ... this was something else. When I say I was relaxed to the max, I mean it.

It was almost like being in a trance. Or hypnotized (at least that's how I'd imagine hypnosis to feel). It was so relaxing that even as my eyes fluttered ever so slightly open and I could see my own eyelashes, it felt like it would be too much work to just close them the rest of the way. Like the muscles in my eyelids said "*Nah, I'll just chill here, 'kay?*"

And, yes, I was very OK with it.

Some time later, Bodner was touching my shoulder and I felt something like a small buzz of electricity running down my right hand. It was a familiar feeling to me. Since my finger amputation, I've had similar [phantom sensations](#) — feelings in a finger that no longer exists — but it's been a while. But just by resting her hand lightly on my shoulder, it felt to me as if Bodner had re-awakened the connections that used to control a now-missing finger. It wasn't uncomfortable or painful. More like a pleasant reminder of a part of me that I've been missing.

The rest of the session passed in a kind of delirious calm. When it was over and I returned to the land of the fully conscious, I told Bodner I thought she was some kind of magician.

"That's nothing to do with me," she laughed. "That's just the Reiki. I'm just

After giving me a few minutes alone to more fully come to, Bodner and I chatted.

She shared that when giving Reiki, she feels that she goes into a kind of trance herself. Like she's being guided to move to certain parts of the body. To hold her position in particular places, waiting until she can feel that it's time to move on.

I told her about the fluttering in my back, the sensations in my amputated finger, the deeeeeeeep state of calm.

She smiled.

"Hold on to that," Bodner advised. "Because if you were to do another session, it could feel completely different. With Reiki, your body takes the energy it needs. Next time, you might need something else. And that could feel totally new."

Perhaps that explains the vast differences in how people describe their Reiki experience. Some say they felt nothing. Others will tell you about the deep relaxation they felt. Others consider it something akin to an out-of-body experience.

Or perhaps it all depends on your expectations. If you're not open to the idea that Reiki will do anything, maybe it won't. Or maybe there are other factors at play.

"People will frequently describe a Reiki session as ushering in a state of relaxation and calm," Dr. Saper acknowledges. "There are data about how an interaction between a healthcare professional and a patient can be

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“So is the room that one is in. Is it a calming, peaceful, pleasant room? Is the furniture you’re lying on comfortable? Are the temperature, humidity, and ambient light and sound at such a level that it is comforting? Perhaps Reiki is a sum total experience of those factors that help to create the conditions that create a calmness within the patient.”

In other words, could it be that the peace I felt in that room was less a matter of receiving an unseen universal life force energy and more about simply being in an environment that allowed my body and mind to take a load off? Possibly.

After all, when’s the last time I just lay still for an hour, listening to twinkling music without any agenda other than to relax? Probably never.

Should you try Reiki?

For me, the effects of my session lasted maybe a few hours. After leaving Bodner’s office, I felt a bit more energized. Focused. Clear.

The next day? Nothing of note.

And I was still left with a nagging question: *Is Reiki worth it?*

To Dr. Saper, it’s a matter of how you’re using Reiki as a therapy. “One of the potential safety issues with any complementary therapy is that a person with either a diagnosed serious condition or an undiagnosed symptom that may be the sign of something serious could potentially pursue alternative therapies in lieu of appropriate medical evaluation.”

But what could be unsafe is pursuing Reiki as your sole method of treatment. If you have something like chronic pain and choose Reiki instead of getting appropriate medical interventions – like surgery, physical therapy or other evidence-based treatments – you’re rolling the dice.

If you’re living with cancer and choose Reiki over prescribed chemotherapy or radiation, you’re doing your health a big disservice.

Reiki isn’t going to cure a herniated disk, a dislocated shoulder, an anxiety disorder, cancer or any other condition. It’s not an approved medical treatment for anything on its own. And treating it as such can have dangerous repercussions for your health.

Using Reiki as but one tool to care for your body and mind? That’s the safe and healthy route.

Reiki is a complementary therapy

Reiki may feel good for you. And feeling good is important. We can all benefit from pursuing activities that lower our stress and bring joy to our lives.

But Reiki should be considered as a [complementary therapy](#), not an alternative to conventional medicine. That’s to say, consider Reiki as something to try only *in addition to* accepted conventional medicine practices as recommended by a healthcare provider. It’s not a replacement for science-backed treatments.

And maybe I'll give Reiki a try again one day. Not because I know that the universal life force energy has healed anything. But because I think we can all benefit from taking some time for ourselves to feel our best.

And it felt really, really good.



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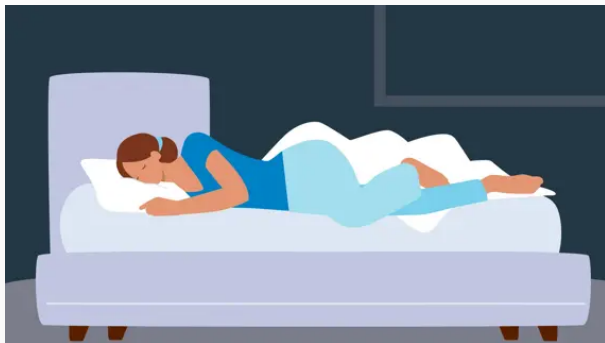


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