

U-Press Telegram

Helping hands

The healing art of reiki hailed as a stress and pain reliever

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Sunday, May 01, 2005 - Jo Ann Levine was so grief-stricken after her brother died years ago that her body began to shut down. She couldn't sleep or eat. Her liver stopped functioning properly. Rashes covered her body. And her hands were so swollen, she couldn't use them.

Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with the Redlands woman. Then one day, Levine stumbled across someone who said she could help.

Trained in the healing art of reiki, this gentle woman changed Levine's life. After one hourlong session where the woman softly placed her hands on different parts of Levine's body, Levine said she slept restfully for the first time in three months. And when she woke up the next morning, the swelling in her hands was gone and her rashes had disappeared.

"I was elated. For the first time I felt hopeful," said Levine, 47. "I felt like I was going to be able to get on with my life."

Not only did she get on, but she decided to help others. She mastered reiki and opened her own practice in Redlands 16 years ago.

For many, reiki has helped them find relief from arthritis, fibromyalgia, migraines, stress, allergies, high blood pressure, heart conditions and chronic pain. Reiki is also purported to enhance personal awareness, promote creativity, strengthen the immune system and clear toxins. More than anything, reiki appears to help people feel a calmness they've never known.

"Reiki allows you to feel what it feels like to have total peace," Levine said.

WHAT IS REIKI?

Reiki (pronounced ray-kee) is a Japanese word that literally means spirit energy. It is based on the idea that cosmic, life-force energy surrounds us and if channeled correctly, can restore balance to the body, enabling it to heal itself on a multitude of levels.

During a reiki session, a reiki practioner (or master) acts as a conduit to this energy and gently places his or her hands over or on the client's eyes, ears and other parts of the body, usually in a specific

sequence starting with the crown of the head. Reiki can be used in massage therapy or other modalities, but a reiki session involves no massage — only touch.

In a quiet setting with music playing softly in the background, a reiki practitioner works his or her way along the client's fully-clothed body. Sometimes the practitioner will feel blockages of energy or stagnant energy and his or her hands will linger over those areas longer until the energy is sufficiently moving again.

"We don't diagnose. We are not responsible for the healing," reiki master and teacher Veronica Dougherty of Ontario said. "We're just responsible for holding the space of unconditional love so (clients) can heal themselves."

Each practitioner senses something different when conducting reiki. Some feel the energy as flowing water; others feel heat. And some visualize colors or images. It's an intuition that grows with training and time, Dougherty explained.

VALUE OF HUMAN TOUCH

Society today is high tech, low touch, Dougherty said.

"We spend so much time with technology that it takes us away from our own humanity," she said.

Studies show babies will die if they're not held in the early days of their lives. Adults may not die, but if left alone and untouched, they could become ill.

"The bottom line is that touch is very important," Dougherty said.

She's not the only one who thinks so.

Heather Stevning, a hypnotherapist and yoga instructor in Redlands who used to perform traditional reiki, said human touch is so important that everyone should all be more comfortable doing hands-on kind of work. But she believes it doesn't have to be reiki. Reiki is just a method people can use, she said.

REAL OR IMAGINED?

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a branch of the National Institutes of Health, places reiki with biofield medicine, which involves systems that use subtle energy fields in and around the body for medical purposes. Other systems include therapeutic touch (or touch therapy) and qi gong, a self-healing art that combines movement and meditation.

According to the federal government branch of alternative medicine, reiki research isn't sufficient to prove its efficacy. But it mentions on its Web site that there is impressive anecdotal evidence that reiki does work for some.

Anastasia Bogomolova, a molecular biologist and reiki practitioner in Tampa, Fla., put together a listing of available research about reiki on her Web site, <http://www.reikimedresearch.com/>. "The research is not enough to convince doctors, but patients are using it (reiki) anyway," Bogomolova said.

Care Alternatives Hospice in Ontario has a number of volunteers with experience in reiki, massage, music or pet therapy who help ease the passing of those who are dying. "Reiki is a very gentle method of touch therapy. Patients respond to it very well," said Hilda McCoy, a registered nurse and corporate volunteer director for Care Alternatives Hospice, headquartered in New Jersey.

Of course, there are always the skeptics. A Time magazine columnist recently criticized a British hospital for hiring a full-time reiki practitioner, saying reiki is nothing but quackery.

But those treated by reiki are offended by that assertion.

"The only thing I know is I won't deny my own experience," said Mickey Ridgway, 66, of Ontario. "It doesn't have anything to do with faith or belief. You just know what you know."

Ridgway learned of reiki at her church and felt called to it. She began taking a class taught by Dougherty at InnerWorks Wellness Center in Upland.

"When I took the first class, such a shift happened in my life. Truly," Ridgway said. "It was amazing."

Before she started reiki, she suffered excruciating arthritis in her hip and other joints. Now, she rarely has pain.

"I used to wake up every morning and wonder what little pain I was going to have to put up with that day and I just don't do that anymore," Ridgway said.

She also noticed that she became softer and more calm.

Pat Pruden, 68, of Claremont had taken a toxic medication that forced her to use an oxygen tank just to breathe. She discovered reiki, and after some sessions with Dougherty, she recovered quickly and no longer needs the oxygen.

"The biggest change," she said, "is feeling at peace and feeling healthier."

Reiki benefits the practitioners as well. They often perform reiki on themselves — at home, in the car,

anywhere — by placing their hands on their own bodies in specific places. This not only helps them physically, mentally and spiritually, but it makes them better conduits for others.

"Life happens, but we have a tool that we own that can restore us," said reiki master Kristi Coulter, 25, of Fontana, "so that we are working from a place of wholeness."

And when they work on others, practitioners say they feel rejuvenated, enlivened and at peace.

For most reiki practitioners, reiki encompasses the healing power of love.

"It opens your heart. It's an energy of love and love heals all. There are many energetic practices out there, but reiki focuses on the energy of the heart for the highest good (for everyone involved)," Dougherty said.

Reiki practitioners say everyone has an inherent healer inside them and reiki merely awakens it.

"Everyone has the gift, we've just forgotten it," said Coulter, who teaches reiki at Chaffey Community College in Rancho Cucamonga. "It's just a matter of remembering."