



# Harnessing a Healing Touch

Learn the fundamentals of reiki—an often-misunderstood, energy-focused healing practice. *By Rachel Kossman*

**Reiki**, pronounced *ray-key*, is a Japanese term that translates to universal (*rei*) life force energy (*ki*). Most practitioners describe reiki as an energy-centric healing technique; some allude to its Japanese roots, others use the terms “hands-on” or “spiritual,” but virtually all emphasize its stress reduction and relaxation benefits.

Officially, reiki has only existed since the 1920s; however, the misconceptions and confusion surrounding the healing practice have grown throughout the past century. “Reiki is hard to talk about, especially if you don’t understand the mechanisms behind it,” explains Pamela Miles, reiki master, integrative health consultant and author of the book *Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide* (Deckle Edge, 2008).

In layman’s terms, reiki is “a simple and natural healing method that reduces stress, induces relaxation and promotes deep healing within oneself,” clarifies Angela

Fisk, a level two reiki practitioner, LMT and certified reflexologist. “Reiki is based on the ‘life force energy’ that’s within each of us,” continues Fisk, who offers reiki sessions at Avani Day Spa & Yoga Studio in Hastings, Nebraska. “When a person is experiencing chronic illness, depression, anxiety or any other sickness, it can be because their life force energies are off balance.”

Individuals who practice reiki work with their patients to tune into those energies and help rebalance the body so that it can heal itself. This is done when a practitioner places their hands on, or slightly over, the client’s head, torso and legs in a series of positions near the body’s major energy meridians and centers. “Energy is transferred through these centers, allowing the client to once again function at their best after the session,” explains Angie Webster, a reiki master and meditation teacher.

"There's something about a reiki practitioner's hands that reminds your body of its capacity to self-heal," says Miles. "The recipient's system responds by moving toward a more balanced state—shifting from the sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic nervous system."

To further grasp the fundamentals of reiki, it's important to understand its foundation and beginnings.



## REIKI'S ROOTS

Although other energy-healing practices had been in existence for centuries prior, reiki itself was envisaged by the Japanese scholar Mikao Usui, who developed it after a 21-day fasting meditation trip to Mount Kurama. The exact date of that journey (some say 1914, others 1922) and tales of precisely what happened on that mountaintop vary, but following his spiritual revelation, it's confirmed that Usui returned to Kyoto to develop the practice of reiki. There, he worked with locals, healed his neighbors and "gave away" his energy.

During this time period, Usui trained reiki's next grand master: Chujiro Hayashi, a naval officer and physician. The mentee opened a reiki clinic in Tokyo, where he worked with a myriad of sick individuals, including Hawayo Takata, a Japanese-American woman from Hawaii. Takata, too, was taken with reiki, and in addition to becoming the practice's third grand master, she is credited with introducing reiki to the Western world via her home state in the early 1940s.

Over the last 70 years, the practice has grown more

commonplace, with countless individuals across the U.S. becoming certified reiki students and masters. As wellness comes to the forefront in the U.S.—and merges with the spa world—reiki has begun to stand out.

## MANAGING MISCONCEPTIONS

It's equally important to understand what reiki *isn't*. For starters, Webster makes sure to explain to her clients that reiki and massage are not synonymous. "Reiki is the movement of energy, not tissue or muscle," she expounds. "It doesn't involve the rubbing, kneading or manipulation of tissue."

Another important clarification is that reiki practitioners don't diagnose or treat medical or psychiatric conditions, unless they're also a medical doctor or certified therapist. "We don't claim to cure anything," notes Webster. "We're able to offer supportive therapy that can promote balance, comfort and pain relief during treatment, but reiki is not meant to be a primary source of care for health concerns."

## Case Study: Reiki Meets Spa

At Avani Day Spa & Yoga Studio in Hastings, Nebraska, owner Elizabeth Israel-Hartmann is a level two reiki practitioner. She employs several other reiki-certified spa pros, including Angela Fisk, who is also an LMT and certified reflexologist.

"Reiki and the spa world go hand in hand," explains Fisk. "Both focus on the body, mind and soul through stress reduction and relaxation. Spa pros and reiki practitioners promote self-improvement, self-healing and help individuals feel better about their body through their services."

Israel-Hartmann couldn't agree more, and promotes reiki not just to

her clients, but to her staff as well.

"I encourage all my employees, especially our massage therapists, to become reiki-certified," she says. "I feel strongly that it kicks their services up a notch, even for my estheticians and nail techs. They might not end up practicing reiki regularly, but just being aware of this type of energy harnessing takes their services to another level—it gives clients a sense of comfort and a deeper sensation of healing."

Israel-Hartmann incorporates reiki into Avani's menu by offering 30-, 45- and 60-minute sessions, and reiki also forms part of the spa's Chakra Massage. Fisk offers popular 90-minute sessions

that combine reiki and reflexology. For individuals who may be hesitant to experience reiki, practitioners often introduce a few minutes of the practice mid-session, and they typically find that clients who are already relaxed on the treatment table are more open to reiki's positive effects.

Overall, Avani's employees emphasize how well reiki fits into their spa and wellness space. "Spas are places where people can gather to relax and get back on the right track," explains Fisk. "Both spa and reiki are about taking time out of our busy schedules to set aside moments for ourselves."



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## ALTERNATIVE HEALTH



Miles encourages people to think of reiki as a form of *integrative* medicine. "For example, acupuncture is used as *alternative* medicine because a client might undergo 20 sessions to try to avoid back surgery," she explains. "Reiki professionals are almost never replacing medical care.

Rather, we're enhancing its effectiveness and the body's ability to recover."

Because reiki is often referred to as a spiritual practice, many people tend to falsely conclude that it's a religion, or has religious affiliations. "Spiritual practices, such as yoga and meditation, can be about discerning the mystery and the meaning our lives, and our relationship with ourselves. That's what is meant by spiritual; it's not religious," clarifies Miles.

Another challenge in understanding reiki is its certification process as there are varying terminologies. However, it's widely recognized that those who practice reiki are either first degree (level one), second degree (level two) or reiki masters (level three). But, explains Miles, "you aren't required to be a reiki master to be a professional." In many cases, a level one certification is all that reiki practitioners need, and developing their skills is more about practicing on others, and on themselves.

## BURGEONING BENEFITS

After receiving reiki, most people report feeling peaceful and relaxed; many enter a meditative-like state. "Clients often say they have sensations that my hands are still on their limbs," reports Miles. Other common post-reiki indications include heightened awareness, belly gurgles, a change in breathing, yawning and a sensation of falling asleep. Reiki seeks to promote balance in the body to optimize self healing, therefore, every individual can have a unique response to this type of energy transmission and receiving.

There are limited scientific studies relating to reiki, so the most reliable way to understand its benefits is by talking to recipients. In fact, Miles frequently speaks about the practice to large groups of wellness professionals, and likes to let them experience it directly. "Even in an audience of 300 people, I'll have 10 therapists who can touch two people at a time," she explains. "After just 60 seconds, participants have sampled a reiki experience."

Although reiki's concrete benefits vary, Miles reminds people that there are no known medical contraindications. "There are no cited instances that suggest reiki is dangerous, and this level of safety is a big selling point," she notes. "Reiki is safe because its foundational touch is light, not manipulative."

At the very least, clients who are skeptical or resistant to the practice can simply experience an hour of silent relaxation. "Reiki promotes a beautiful healing process for people, even when they don't quite know what's happening," says Elizabeth Israel-Hartmann, owner of Avani Day Spa & Yoga Studio. "Once I started practicing reiki, I noticed an intense client loyalty. My guests began telling me, 'I love your services, and I only want to come to you!'" ■

Rachel Kossman is DAYSPA's senior editor.

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