

Energy therapy: Where mysticism meets science

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Anne Broderick believes she can use her hands to alter the energy fields of others to help them heal, taking away fatigue, stress and nausea.

A clinical trial at Stanford University aims to prove it. The university is testing whether an energy therapy called Healing Touch can reduce the debilitating effects of chemotherapy on breast cancer patients.

It's the juncture where touchy-feely New Age mysticism meets hard science.

Healing Touch is a noninvasive energy therapy program founded by a registered nurse in Colorado in 1989. Its following has spread nationwide. Advocates stress that it isn't a cure but a way of easing the stress, fatigue and nausea of radiation and chemotherapy.

The results of Stanford's three-year clinical trial won't be known for two more years, but some who already have undergone the therapy at a Stanford medical program called Healing Partners say they know it works.

"It opened my mind up to the fact there are some things in this world that we can't explain, and that doesn't make them any less real," said breast cancer survivor Catherine Palter, a trained geologist who typically prefers more scientific explanations.

It all started for Palter after doctors diagnosed her with the cancer in 2005. She began the full Western-style treatment plan: surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and hormone therapy.

But she craved the peace of mind of knowing she had tried everything. She heard Stanford had a program that used an "energy therapy" - Healing Touch. What could it hurt?

Someone worked with her weekly for six months to improve her energy flow by simply touching parts of her body such as legs, arms, back and head. The results were immediate and powerful, she said. The lethargy and fatigue of the chemotherapy disappeared. Her surgery wound rapidly healed. She could better cope with the fear of not being there for her two daughters.

"As a scientist, I didn't have a real spiritual background," said Palter, who works in the Stanford University planning office on land-use issues. "I found it really powerful."

Breast cancer patients desperately want to feel better, and that often makes them open to trying something new. Non-Hispanic white women in the Bay Area have among the highest breast cancer rates in the world: 149.6 per 100,000 had cancer between 2001 and 2005, compared with 138.2 nationally.

The established risk factors for breast cancer include, among others, higher income, higher education, having fewer children, waiting to have children, family history/genetics, hormone therapy and alcohol, said Tina Clarke, research scientist at the Northern California Cancer Center in Fremont.

Healing Partners has paired more than 100 breast cancer patients with Healing Touch providers since the free program began three years ago at Stanford.

That success prompted its director, Kathy Turner, a registered nurse, to prove its effectiveness in a randomized, controlled clinical trial that started last year. As all undergo chemotherapy, one group of breast cancer patients receives Healing Touch for 20 minutes, a second group listens to a relaxation tape, and a third gets nothing. Researchers haven't yet analyzed the initial data.

Impact of clinical trials

Given the Bay Area's abnormally high breast cancer rates among white women, a process proven to alleviate the devastating effects of cancer treatment could have far-reaching effects, Turner said. Success in the clinical realm could confer widespread legitimacy on a practice that many might otherwise dismiss as loopy and weird.

"It's based on the belief that our bodies are surrounded by a field of energy and our bodies themselves are a denser form of energy," Turner said. "The belief there is that once the body's energy is cleared and balanced, our bodies have the innate capacity to heal themselves."

The underlying technique is age-old, advocates say, and intends to balance and align people's energy fields so they become "whole in body, mind, emotion and spirit" - although no one knows quite how it works.

People remain fully clothed. A lot of it is actual touching, but if someone has just had surgery, the healer can work above the person's body. Healing Touch International Inc. runs a certification program across the country that many nurses take, but it's open to everyone.

Broderick, a former corporate executive turned psychotherapist, provides Healing Touch to Lydia Li every week. Both survived breast cancer and took part in Healing Partners at Stanford.

Earlier this month, Li arrived at Broderick's Palo Alto office with shoulder pain and a headache. She lay on a massage table, and Broderick covered her fully clothed body with a white sheet. Broderick, 69, then silently told herself, "I set my intention for the highest good," and began methodically touching Li to the sounds of running water and quiet music, occasionally sweeping her hands above her. At times, she firmly held a foot, knee or wrist. At others, she seemed to play an imaginary piano on Li's back.

Often, Broderick begins sessions by holding a crystal (although she said a "lifesaver on a string" would work just as well) 4 inches above Li and watches it circle over the seven chakras - energy vortices - that run along the length of the body. Clockwise is a good sign. No movement or one that's counterclockwise means the person could use some help getting healthy energy flow, she says.

Li, 56, a business development manager at Hewlett-Packard in Palo Alto, never would have believed in energy therapy a decade ago. She remembers asking at her initial Healing Touch sessions: "What is energy like? Why can't I see it?" The effects can feel like a tingling sensation or heat, she says. Once, a dramatic light flicked on in her head after Broderick swept her hands over it, lifting her post-chemotherapy fog.

Reticent with colleagues

Even though energy therapy is a major part of her life, she rarely brings it up with colleagues at Hewlett-Packard.

"I wouldn't tell everyone I have this side of me," she said. "They would think I'm weird."

Broderick herself underwent chemotherapy in 2005 and expected to spend months curled up in a little ball. But she felt little nausea and could still meet with clients.

"Was it Healing Touch?" she said, "I don't know. Probably. I'm sure it helped."

If you want to know more

For more information about Healing Touch and class schedules:

links.sfgate.com/ZDLN

links.sfgate.com/ZDLM

For more information about Healing Partners at Stanford:

links.sfgate.com/ZDLO

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