

## Energy Medicine: A Hidden Dimension of Health and Healing

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The umbrella of integrative medicine is large and inclusive, with a growing body of good science and sound clinical practice to back it up. As the field matures, doubts have subsided about many practices, especially those considered mind/body in focus such as biofeedback, meditation, and hypnosis. However, another group of novel therapies is still under the gun from skeptics, largely because they are so difficult to explain; for example, homeopathy's infinitesimal dilutions, Therapeutic Touch's lack of actual physical contact, and even acupuncture's invisible points. How can these therapies possibly work? What is the nature of the so-called subtle energy that their practitioners always refer to? These are questions that concern the specialized branch of integrative medicine called Energy Medicine.

The concept of subtle energy itself, the final common pathway of many of these unusual therapies, is basic to almost all of the world's great healing traditions. Yoga has its *prana*, traditional Chinese medicine has its *qi*, and Jewish mysticism has its *ruach*.

Aside from such discredited theories as Franz Mesmer's Animal Magnetism and Wilhelm Reich's orgone, however, Western allopathic medicine has shied away from vitalistic theories of dynamic balance, of energy flows and blockages. We have assumed that health and illness can be understood by breaking down the machine of the human body into its component parts, and then finding and replacing the broken bits. There's no real notion of an integrative health-maintaining process or function; homeostasis, we suppose, happens accidentally, if at all.

But other cultures have devoted as much time and energy to exploring the realm of subtle body energies as we have to our high tech interventions and synthetic pharmaceuticals. In some ways, their results are just as impressive as ours. For example, our traditional map of the human body is studied in gross and microscopic anatomy—organs, tissues, and cells. Practitioners of the various branches of

energy medicine have created a parallel discipline called subtle anatomy, whose components must be dissected via introspection if the physiology of energy dynamics is to be understood. The main components of this human subtle energy matrix are threefold: (1) the overall storage vessel (the energy field, or aura); (2) the distribution pathways (more familiarly known as the acupuncture meridians); and (3) the

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transformers, which modulate the quality of this universal life energy (the *chakras*, or energy centers).

As we take a closer look at this subtle anatomy and its attendant physiology, arcane techniques of energy medicine begin to make some sense. Each energy component has both a clinical application in energy medicine, as well as an everyday life experience.

### The Energy Field

The overall container of the energy field is the part of humans that extends beyond the skin. Using sophisticated magnetometers, it is now possible to measure the extent of the human electromagnetic field. Studies have shown that people in certain intentionally altered states of consciousness can create dramatic fluctuations in these fields; surges in the body's electrical potential ranging from 4 to 190 volts have been recorded in energy healing meditations (Green). In everyday life, we experience this bounded field as our sense of personal space—when we recoil at someone's intrusion, we have felt his energy impinging into our personal electromagnetic domain.

Therapeutically, the energy medicine intervention that is most specially focused on this component is Therapeutic Touch. Developed by the nurse Delores Krieger over 30 years ago, this technique involves no physi-

cal contact between nurse healer and patient, only hand movements 6 to 12 inches from the surface of the patient's body. The nurse will initially assess the quality of the energy field for imbalances, and then smooth out these irregularities. Research on this widespread modality (over 10,000 RN's in America have been trained) is spotty, with the two best known studies being controversial and possibly invalid. A school-

girl's attempt to show that energy field detection is not reliable was published in *JAMA* (and publicized in *People* magazine), despite crucial methodological flaws (Rosa). An earlier study which seemed to show that TT facilitated wound healing has never been adequately replicated (Wirth).

### The Distribution Pathways

These are the meridians and acupoints. Not simply random points on the skin assigned by superstitious Chinese priests (as my medical school anatomy professor maintained), classic acupoints have been shown to be specific locations which are characterized by markedly diminished electrical resistance that is detectable even with inexpensive Radio Shack ohm meters. Interestingly, Western medicine has evolved a parallel notion with its recent discovery of myofascial trigger points, specific locations that are electrically activated in the syndrome of myofascial pain disorder, and which often correspond in location to classical acupuncture points.

So, when a physiatrist performs so-called dry needling to deactivate these points, he or she is essentially performing a Western version of acupuncture. And when we rub our temples or the bridge of our nose to alleviate a tension headache, we're unconsciously finding and stimulating several ▶

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key acupuncture points. Acupuncture now has a vast clinical literature, and has been deemed safe and effective for a number of conditions (NIH Consensus Statement). A recent adaptation of acupuncture energetics has expanded the domain of energy medicine to the field of psychotherapy. In the techniques of energy psychology, the patient self-stimulates key acupoints while simultaneously reviewing a traumatic memory. This technique seems to dissolve the conditioned fear response that is the basis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

### The Energy Centers

The energy centers, or *chakras*, are the least familiar in the West, yet have the strongest medical correlates. In India,

yogis who spent years in silent introspection described a series of seven major centers where the life energy of the body seemed to be most powerfully concentrated. These seven *chakras* along the vertical axis were alleged to take universal life energy and imprint it with a particular energetic stamp, like step-down transformers making high voltage electricity from the power plant usable to homeowners. Interestingly, the location of these seven centers corresponds to the major endocrine glands, even though these yogis did not pursue gross anatomy.

All of us have had occasional experiences when our energy systems are so heightened that we can actually detect its flow. Examples would include the butterflies in the stomach when nervous, sexual arousal in the groin, tingling on the top of the scalp when in awe, and warmth in the sternum when

we feel love. These commonplace emotions actually mirror the energy functions ascribed to these locations several thousand years ago.

Energy therapies based on the *chakras* have not been as well studied as acupuncture or TT. Practitioners of energy healing like Rosalyn Bruyere and Barbara Brennan have developed healing systems in which impairments in *chakra* function are seen as impairing the function of adjacent physical organs. Case reports abound, but controlled studies are yet to come. Patients, however, are becoming increasingly aware of such approaches as Reiki, Healing Touch, and external qi gong, and will surely be reporting their experiences to MDs more regularly in the years ahead.

Finally, I haven't even mentioned

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