

# Reiki Healing and Mental Health: What the Research Shows

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Healing touch [therapies](#), the best known being Reiki (pronounced RAY-key), are ancient practices in increasingly wide use today.

According to the International Association of Reiki Professionals (IARP), “Reiki is [a] subtle and effective form of energy healing using spiritually guided life force energy... [p]racticed in every country of the world.”

While often considered to be spiritual in nature, Reiki is not “[a]ffiliated with any particular religion or religious practice.”



Reiki is increasingly offered in hospital, hospice, and private practice settings, applied to a variety of illnesses and conditions. Those who receive such treatments report relief of symptoms from numerous health challenges, including mental health issues. Research shows that reiki primarily helps in the reduction of stress, [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), as well as relief of chronic pain – the last of which can bring on anxiety and depression, or make episodes worse.

## Many Studies, Varying Quality

There are now sufficient peer-reviewed, published research results available to begin to sort out Reiki’s effectiveness in various areas. The Center for Reiki Research has intensively examined a group of them through their “Touchstone Process,” “...a uniquely rigorous peer review method for analyzing a group of scientific studies” [using Reiki]. Its end product is a set of critical summaries derived from an impartial and consistent process.... [T]he process incorporates existing best practices for scientific review...” (CRR)

This process looks at all aspects of the study design and how each investigation was actually carried out. Results are analyzed, and study strengths and weaknesses are determined. The Touchstone Process has produced a group of nearly three dozen carefully analyzed studies. The CRR draws some conclusions

about Reiki's effectiveness from only the studies they have examined that they judge to be of at least satisfactory or better quality. (CRR)

In addition to the CRR/Touchstone studies, a varied body of research on Reiki demonstrates its effect on mental health. For example, Joe Potter, a Reiki Master in the United Kingdom, has been conducting an ongoing investigation into Reiki's effectiveness. An online search in PubMed lists dozens of studies involving Reiki or other healing touch methods, investigating a broad range of conditions in many different populations.

Some investigations were conducted on animals, which helps eliminate some questions of bias and design control among Reiki recipients. Some studies used "sham" Reiki as a form of control (nonpractitioners administered a "Reiki-like" treatment), and others involved distance Reiki (Reiki delivered from too far away to permit touch). Each of these variables lends something important to understanding the efficacy of the treatment itself.

## Demonstrated Effects on Stress, Depression, Anxiety and Pain

Potter reports that "[s]tress was the most common word written by clients as a description or part description of their condition during their first session. Here 20.27% of the total client group treated used this word on their initial visit for Reiki treatment..." In animal studies, Reiki treatment produced clear signs of reduced stress as indicated by changes in autonomic, biological measurements such as heart rate (Baldwin, Wagers and Schwartz, 2008) and certain cellular signs of stress-related damage (Baldwin and Schwartz, 2006). In a study of nurses with "burn out syndrome," biological indicators of a significant relaxation response were found as a result of Reiki treatment (Diaz-Rodriguez et al., 2011). When nurses administered Reiki to a group of patients with acute coronary syndrome, physiologic indicators of a significant relaxation effect were recorded. (Friedman et al., 2011)

Shore (2004) followed patients being treated for mild depression and stress. After six weeks of treatment and for up to a year afterward, those who had received Reiki showed both immediate and long-term improvements in depression, stress and hopelessness. In a small study, complete elimination of typical postoperative depression was seen in heart surgery patients given Reiki during surgery (Motz, 1998).

Pain often causes depression and anxiety. Reducing difficult-to-treat chronic pain can have a substantial effect on psychological well-being. Some studies have found Reiki to be effective for pain, anxiety and depression relief. However, their design or conclusions are unclear as to whether Reiki's emotional benefits were a result of pain reduction or a separate phenomenon. Nonetheless, research demonstrated Reiki's positive results for both pain and anxiety or depression.

Dressing and Sing (1998) found that among cancer patients, Reiki brought about significant levels of pain relief, anxiety and depression reduction, improvements in sleep quality, relaxation and general well-being. This effect was stronger in men than women. These benefits remained when checked after three months. Among abdominal hysterectomy patients, Reiki helped reduce pain and anxiety, particularly in a preoperative setting (Vitale and O'Conner, 1998).

## Investigating Effects of Gentle Touch, Distance

Research shows that gentle touch in a safe environment aids stress reduction and pain relief (for example, Weze et al., 2005). Since Reiki generally involves a similar type of touch, the results of Reiki studies often can be confounded by the known impact of gentle touch vs. the effects of Reiki itself. Studies that include sham Reiki treatment groups, as well as those that involve a distance Reiki group, have been important to help sort out the relative effects of Reiki versus gentle touch – or even the effects of the presence of a “therapist,” real or sham.

Reiki is becoming an increasingly accepted presence in hospitals and clinics. (The Center for Reiki Research website lists 70 institutions at the time of this article that include Reiki in their offerings.) It is seen as an effective and cost-reducing method to improve health outcomes and quality of care. Hospital staff, such as physicians and nurses, are adding Reiki treatments to their work. Scientific validation of Reiki's effectiveness have helped bring this method to the mainstream, where it is able to aid patients in all realms, including those with mental health challenges.

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