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## Lea Michele

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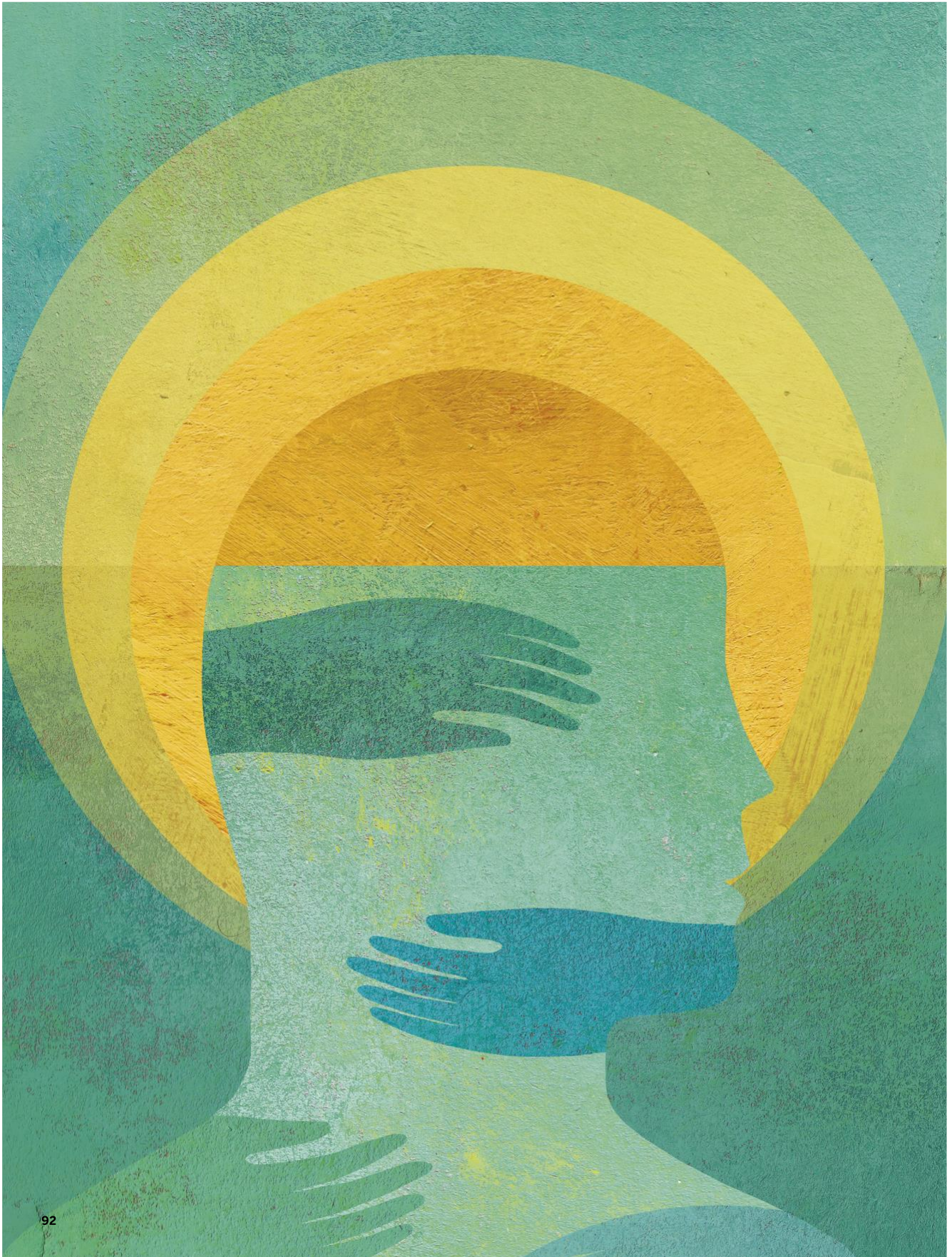
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## The Beauty Issue





# THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT ENERGY HEALING

THIS FORM OF MEDICINE WITH ANCIENT ROOTS  
IS FINALLY GOING MAINSTREAM. WE TALKED TO EXPERTS  
AND DUG INTO RESEARCH TO FIND  
OUT WHY IT'S LASTED NEARLY FOUR MILLENNIA.

BY JANCEE DUNN

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNE GODEASSI

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In the past few years, the field of energy healing has pretty much exploded—but there's a ton of confusion around it, too. What is it, exactly? Are there credible studies on it? And isn't it just a little bit...woo-woo?

Let's start with the definition: Energy medicine (or biofield therapies) is the act of channeling and manipulating the energy that courses through your body in order to heal it. This can be done with hands-on practices, such as acupuncture and Reiki, as well as sensory-based experiences, like the use of crystals, sound baths, and aromatherapy.

Once derided as too mystical, energy medicine is becoming more common—trendy, even. Adele reportedly said that she performs better when she holds crystals. Kim Kardashian West visited a local energy healer while on vacation in Bali. And some elite athletes in the NFL and NBA now bring Reiki masters on the road. Increasingly, scientists are starting to take energy medicine seriously too.



## The Medical Theory

Energy practitioners believe that your body is instilled with a subtle energy, or animating life force, the flow of which must be balanced for good health. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, this force is called qi (pronounced “chee”); in Ayurvedic medicine, which originated in India, it’s represented in the doshas, three energies (vata, pitta, and kapha) that provide every person’s makeup. The basis of energy medicine is removing blocks in your body’s energetic field that can cause poor health.

Energy medicine has been around for thousands of years—a description of the “laying on of hands” to relieve pain was found in an ancient Egyptian papyrus document from 1550 BC. But even with its long history, people find it hard to wrap their heads around energy medicine, says acupuncturist and Chinese medicine doctor Jill Blakeway, author of the recent book *Energy Medicine: The Science and Mystery of Healing*. This is not helped by the fact that this field is, as she says bluntly, “rife with quackery.” Anyone can basically call him- or herself an energy healer, says Blakeway, a funny, forthcoming Brit who works with MDs and is the opposite of woo-woo. “While practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine are licensed and do either a four-year masters or a five-year doctorate, there are no minimum standards for most other types of energy work.”

Yufang Lin, MD, an integrative medicine physician at the Cleveland Clinic who is trained in Reiki and qigong, explains to her patients that energy is the foundation for everything we do with our bodies. “The idea is that we have this bank of energy, and we have to restore it or replace it,” she says. “In Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, if the energy isn’t flowing well, we get sick.”

We’ve all picked up on other people’s energy when we say that a person has good vibes, or negative energy. “You can absolutely feel it,” says Judith Orloff, MD, an energy healer from Santa Monica, California, and a psychiatrist on the UCLA clinical faculty. Most of us have experienced what Orloff calls an energy hangover: “That’s when the energy of an

interaction or an event lingers the next day when you wake up,” she says, “and it literally feels like a hangover.”

## Gathering Evidence

These days, it seems like everyone in the wellness world is heading into the mystic. But it’s not just trendy spirit warriors who have energy healers on speed dial—some of the country’s best hospitals are hiring them too. The Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and Duke University Health System employ acupuncturists, while Reiki masters are available at the Mayo Clinic’s campus in Rochester, Minnesota. UCSF Medical Center offers qigong for breast cancer survivors, and New York-Presbyterian provides aromatherapy for stress reduction.

Some forms of energy medicine are backed by research. Acupuncture, for example, is supported by solid studies. And a 2010 review of research in the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* found strong evidence that biofield therapies, such as Reiki and therapeutic touch, can alleviate pain, and moderate evidence that they could reduce anxiety in hospitalized patients.

Yet for many energy therapies, scientific evidence is still lagging. One reason is that large, carefully controlled medical studies are costly—and often funded by big companies that develop drugs. “With something like Reiki or therapeutic touch, there’s nothing to sell,” says Dr. Lin.

But as demand grows, more studies are being commissioned. In its most recent strategic plan, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health—the government’s lead agency for research on nonconventional medicine—deemed “nonpharmacologic management of pain” a top scientific priority.

## The Power of Belief

Of course, it’s entirely possible that some of the healing benefits patients report arise from the so-called placebo effect—in which the brain convinces the body that a particular treatment will work, and then it actually does.

## THERAPIES WITH CRED

All kinds of approaches get thrown into the energy bucket—from color therapy to intuitive healing—but these five have gained the most traction.

### ACUPUNCTURE

The research is probably most robust around acupuncture, which has been used for more than two millennia in Chinese medicine. The practice involves inserting thin needles at specific points to improve the overall movement of qi through the body. It’s believed that there are energy networks—called meridians—through which qi travels. Most meridians correspond to a major organ (like the lungs, or the stomach), and most acupuncture points lie on those meridians.

Many Western doctors now believe that stimulation from the needles boosts endorphins, a.k.a. your body’s natural painkillers. In studies, acupuncture has been linked to relief of fibromyalgia pain, low-back pain, migraines, and osteoarthritis. It’s also been found to improve fertility rates and lower hypertension. And one 2013 study published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found that electroacupuncture—in which a mild electric current is transmitted through needles—was as effective as Prozac in reducing symptoms of depression.

Acupuncture is a holistic approach, says Debbie Lamadrid, an acupuncturist at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix. “The goal in Chinese medicine is to address the entire person, not just their symptoms.”

### QIGONG

An ancient Chinese healing technique, qigong is used to cleanse, cultivate, and strengthen a person’s qi. In what’s known as external qigong, or qi emission, a therapist diagnoses problems according to the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and then uses “emitted qi” to heal. This may involve placing the hands several inches above the body to administer healing qi and remove negative energy. She will also recommend a program to rebalance one’s qi, which may involve breathing techniques and meditation.

While there’s not a lot of research to support external qigong, a 2013 University of Texas study did find that it reduced symptoms of depression among women undergoing radiation for breast cancer.

### REFLEXOLOGY

According to Chinese medicine, your feet, palms, and ears are energy centers, and they are

connected—via meridians—to other body parts. (Your toes reflect your head, for example, and your palms are linked to your kidneys.) When points within those energy centers are stimulated, they can improve energy circulation and rejuvenate corresponding areas elsewhere in the body.

Reflexology also brings on blissfully deep relaxation. (One reason foot reflexology is so calming is that there are nearly 15,000 nerves in your feet.) Research on the practice is nebulous, but a 2016 Israeli study did find that when patients facing major surgery were given reflexology before the operation, their anxiety levels dropped dramatically—and their outcomes after surgery improved, too.

#### REIKI

In the practice of Reiki—the name is formed from the Japanese words *rei* (spirit) and *ki* (vital force)—healers put their hands on or right above your body (which in most cases is fully clothed) in order to direct energy.

As of 2014, more than 60 hospitals in the U.S. included Reiki as part of patient services, according to a UCLA study, and Reiki education was offered at 800.

Vickie Bodner, a licensed massage therapist and Reiki master at the Cleveland Clinic Wellness Institute, says that patients usually come to her for physical and emotional pain, such as fibromyalgia, immune system issues, or depression. It's also good for stress relief. (A Reiki station was set up in New York City after 9/11 to treat firefighters and other first responders.) "Patients find it comforting, calming, and soothing," says Bodner.

#### THERAPEUTIC TOUCH

Developed in the '70s by a professor of nursing at NYU, therapeutic touch, or TT, is used by practitioners (many of them nurses) to sense your body's energy. According to the principles of TT, there are eight regions where energy is concentrated: the head, throat, stomach, heart, lower abdomen, sacral region, knees, and feet.

If the therapist finds an area where energy is not flowing, she will move her hands in a rhythmic motion known as unruffling, starting at the top of the congested area and moving down and away from your body. She'll continue until she no longer detects a blockage or the patient feels relief.

A 2012 study done at the University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center found that just one TT session led to improvement in pain, stress, and nausea in cancer patients.

The placebo effect once had a negative connotation, but now scientists are discovering what a powerful mechanism it can be. Essentially, placebos trigger a relaxation response, which appears to allow the body an opportunity to self-heal. How the effect works, exactly, is still a mystery, but it may involve a burst of feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and endorphins, as well as amped activity in certain brain regions linked to emotional reactions.

In a groundbreaking 2017 study at the University of Luxembourg, participants were given a placebo and told it would reduce their pain. Researchers then scanned the participants' brains and found that areas that processed pain were actually less active than normal. The subjects felt less pain not because they had great imaginations, but because they weren't registering it.

Even Blakeway admits that energy healing likely contains an element of placebo. But as she points out, if it's functioning as part of the healing process, why fear it?

Energy healing may also help people by reducing their stress—which is no small thing. Stress is a common underlying factor in many diseases. Studies have found that 75 percent to 90 percent of primary care visits can be attributed to the effects of stress, and it's linked to the six leading causes of death in the U.S.

The relaxing benefits of acupuncture are well-known. Blakeway's patients sometimes ask her, "What do you put in the needles?" They become so calm during her sessions, they assume she's coated her needles with a sedative.

Dr. Lin says that when she was in med school, she was taught a simple formula: Identify a disease by listening to the symptoms, then treat it with drugs. Now that she has moved into energy healing, the first question she tries to answer is, What is triggering the illness? "Then we try and remove that trigger."

Energy healing requires you to listen carefully to what your body is telling you, adds Dr. Orloff. "That's really the beauty of it. It's about tapping into your own intuition and ability to heal." ☯

## DIY HEALING

In this exercise, Chinese medicine doctor Jill Blakeway, founder of the Yinova Center in New York City, explains how to detect energy blockages in your own body, and ease them along.

Lie down in a comfortable place, such as on a bed or a yoga mat.

Spend a few minutes gently breathing in for a count of six and then breathing out for a count of six. Once your mind feels quiet, scan your body for areas of tension or discomfort.

As you identify areas of tension, place your attention on those areas, without judgment.

Allow the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs associated with this area of your body to simply be present, informing you of the root of your discomfort but not binding you to it.

When it feels right, find a memory that invokes a feeling of safety and warmth. Take this energy and direct it to the area of tension. Allow the warmth to gently release any density or struggle.

As you feel the area release, return your focus to your breath.

Continue with the body scan, stopping to dissipate tension in other areas.

The exercise should take about 30 minutes. Once you are done, lie still for a few minutes and notice how your experience of your body has changed.

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