

Reiki's Use in Dementia Patients and For Their Caregivers

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Memory problems. Stress. Confusion. Bizarre behavior. Depression. Anxiety. Caregiver burnout. These challenges all too often occur in the territory of Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias (ADRD). But what if a gentle "laying on of hands" could give some real help to patients and caregivers alike? And what if this help were scientifically verified in well-conducted research, and published in peer-reviewed journals? Seems like a wild fantasy, doesn't it?

It's not. Research has shown that Reiki (pronounced RAY-key) healing can be effective in addressing a number of the challenges dementia patients and their caregivers face every day. Scientific validation of Reiki's effectiveness comes from numerous studies examining a variety of types of people, problems and settings. This type of solid research has helped bring Reiki into the mainstream.

Reiki, Mild Alzheimer's and Cognitive Impairment

Reiki and other touch and energy therapies significantly aid dementia patients and their caregivers in several areas. One is an indication from published, peer-reviewed research that Reiki can help people with mild cognitive impairment or mild Alzheimer's.

In one experiment, one group of patients received four weeks of Reiki treatments; a control group received none. The Reiki recipients showed statistically significant increases in mental functioning, memory and behavior after Reiki treatment. (Crawford, Leaver and Mahoney, 2006). Caregivers can administer Reiki at little or no cost, potentially reducing the need for medication and hospitalization (Crawford, Leaver, and Mahoney, 2006).

Reiki May Reduce Stress, Depression and Anxiety

"Stress" most often is mentioned by those seeking Reiki treatments (Potter). Dementia is extremely stressful, and anxiety and depression often coincide. Several studies have found Reiki provides biological indications of significant stress reduction, as well as a relaxation response (Baldwin, Wagers and Schwartz, 2008; Baldwin and Schwartz, 2006; Friedman et al., 2011, others).

Research shows that Reiki also can help reduce depression and anxiety among people with chronic illnesses (Dressin and Singg, 1998). Both hands-on and distance Reiki (the latter performed nonlocally, without touch) were found to reduce depression significantly. Effects lasted up to a year post-treatment (Shore, 2004).

Chronic or periodic pain-inducing illnesses can co-occur in dementia patients. As their dementia progresses, it can become impossible for the patient to verbalize their pain. Instead, they may become agitated, withdrawn, aggressive, depressed, anxious, or show some sort of "difficult behavior." Caregivers must figure out that the behavioral change results from untreated physical pain, and then find the painful site and address it. Since Reiki has been shown to reduce pain, dementia patients with pain who undergo treatment might have both disorders addressed simultaneously. (Dressin and Singg, 1998; Birocco, et al., 2011; Richeson, Spross, Lutz and Peng, 2010; others).

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Reiki treatment often results in a state of calm relaxation (Richeson, Spross, Lutz and Peng, 2010; others). Whether pain or some other issue caused their agitation, Reiki can help calm down dementia patients and make dealing with them easier for all involved in their care.

Reiki Also Helps Caregiver Burnout

The Reiki studies reviewed above apply to caregivers as well as patients. The Family Caregiver Alliance reports in general that "...20% of family caregivers suffer from depression, twice the rate of the general population." When it comes specifically to dementia caregivers, "...41% of former caregivers of a spouse with Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia experienced mild to severe depression up to three years after their spouse had died. In general, women caregivers experience depression at a higher rate than men." Covinsky, et al. (2003) report the number with depression to be one-third of primary caregivers during the period while they are caring for their loved ones with dementia.

Nurses are an excellent group to study when it comes to caregiver burnout and Reiki. Many nurses have added Reiki to their skills, and they are a population prone to burnout and compassion fatigue. Studies involving nurses' self-care have demonstrated that Reiki can help prevent and heal caregiver stress and overwhelm. Nurses who practiced Reiki on themselves reported that they choose to do so for daily stress management and self-healing, among other reasons (Vitale, 2009). Perceived stress was also significantly reduced among nurses learning Reiki, though less so if they did not practice self-help Reiki during the study (Cuneo, 2011). In a study of nurses with "burnout syndrome," Reiki was found to provide a significant relaxation response (Diaz-Rodriguez, et al., 2011).

It can be challenging to return to warm, caring feelings following caregiver burnout. Brathovde (2006) and Whelan and Wishnia (2003) reported increased self-satisfaction with nurses' work, and a returned ability to feel caring toward others after the nurses had received Reiki training and used it on both themselves and others.

Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias cannot be cured. People live for many years with the disease, which takes a huge toll both on them and their caregivers. As many effective tools as possible are needed to help manage ADRD and improve quality of life for everyone involved. Empowering family and professional dementia caregivers with Reiki skills can help meet many needs. For both patients and caregivers alike, calmness, improved moods, increased memory capability, reduced pain, and healing from caregiver burnout can be the help so many have been waiting for.

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