

Spiritual Healing: What is it? Does it work and does it have a place in modern healthcare?

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This paper will cover the following points:

- Self-healing visualisation
- My introduction to healing
- The healing session
- Possible mechanisms of effect
- Research evidence of effectiveness
- Its place in modern healthcare

Self-healing visualisation

I would like to convey a proper appreciation of spiritual healing, but this is best experienced rather than described; so I thought I'd start by talking us through a self-healing visualisation to give a flavour of healing and to raise our energies before we start. [See appendix for the visualisation script].

We often give this transcript out to people who come for healing to practice on their own, as a self-care tool – since it is good practice to encourage people to help themselves, as appropriate.

My introduction to healing

I thought you might be interested to hear how I came into healing from being a complete sceptic.

About 15 years ago, my uncle (a mild-mannered businessman) announced at Christmas that he was training to be a healer. We were all very surprised. He told me about his experiences of how well healing had helped people and although I considered that this was almost certainly biased reporting, I was sufficiently interested to want to try to find out more. My uncle gave me the phone number of a healing tutor in Leeds where I lived, and I telephoned her. She told me about a healing introductory course which she was running, but I interrupted her to say that I was not interested in being a healer, I just wanted to find out more about it. She said that to do this introductory course was probably the best way and it was to start in three months time; however, in the meantime I could practice by sending healing, loving energy through me to plants, pets or my children. So this is how I found myself holding out my hands in front of a cactus plant in the kitchen, feeling ridiculous, thinking, 'I can't believe I am doing this!'

Anyway, I forgot about healing until about two weeks before the course was due to start. I was lying in bed with a cold, wheezing, at about 3am, thinking

that I was going to have to get up out of bed for the third night running to get my inhaler. I was feeling so tired that I could not be bothered and so I thought, 'I'll give this healing lark a go!' (My exact thoughts – I was not exactly convinced, just feeling exhausted and ill). I wasn't really sure what to do, so I just raised my hands over my chest, as I lay in bed and asked for healing. What happened next surprised me: My fingers started to tingle; I saw a blue light in my mind's eye and felt a band of heat around my chest. My wheezing stopped immediately. As you can imagine, I felt rather scared by what had happened and in the morning, told my husband that he would never guess what had occurred in the night. However, when I attended the healing course, instead of sitting at the back, rolling my eyes to the ceiling, questioning everything, I listened, because I knew there was something in it and I wanted to find out more.

I now practice healing at three quite different places:

Firstly, the Leeds Healing Centre (a walk-in centre where people attend specifically to receive healing).

Secondly, the Positive Care Programme (A registered charity offering a 24-week programme of one-to-one and group complementary therapies and motivational workshops for people with long-term illness and carers (referrals are mostly by the Primary Care Mental Health Team, local charities, healthcare day centres, etc). Approximately 80% of participants have level 1 and 2 mental health problems.

Thirdly, the York Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, where we are employed to help change the energies of staff and ex-offenders to a more positive state.

A definition of healing

'A treatment that involves the transfer of energy through the healer to the recipient. It promotes self-healing by relaxing the body, releasing tensions and strengthening the body's own immune system. Healing is natural and non-invasive with the intention of bringing the recipient into a state of balance and wellbeing on all levels' (NFSH Healing Trust)

Spiritual healing is not linked to a particular religion. It is not faith healing – even very sceptical people can be healed.

The word 'spiritual' originates from the Latin word 'spiritus' meaning 'breath of life'. The spiritual aspect refers to spiritual energy working at a deep level on our spiritual being. The healing involves the transfer of energy; in other words, it is not from the healer him or herself, but the healer links with 'Universal' or Divine energy to channel healing for the mind, body and spirit.

Components of healing:

- Universal energy or spiritual force (non religious) can be directed by intention
- When focused on the human body, via the aura (human energy field), it raises the 'spiritual vibrations' of that person
- This improves health and allows one's highest nature to unfold
- For optimum healing, repeated treatments needed to overcome the body's inertia
- When people are ill, it is common for them to say that they are 'low in energy'; conversely when people are healthy, we talk about them bursting with energy.

Often, 6-8 sessions may be required to bring about improvement, especially for those with long-term conditions.



You can see in this photograph of a lady receiving healing that she is sat in a chair, fully clothed and relaxed.

What happens in the healing session?

- Recipient - on chair or couch
- Healers attune to the healing energy
- Energy is channelled (usually via the healers' hands) on and around the body to effect the healing

It is important that no specific outcome is promised. Healers cannot truthfully do this, as they act merely as a channel to the healing energy. Healing can also be given as distant healing (when the healer is not in the presence of the patient), whereby, through attunement and visualisation, the healer seeks to promote the wellbeing of and the self-healing of the patient.

Who can be helped?

- Anyone. Many people carry around unhelpful energetic burdens (such as anger or fear) which can be alleviated by healing

- Usually people with long-term mental and physical health conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar states, backache, arthritis, cancer, ME, those 'low in energy' or generally feeling 'out of sorts'

What do people experience during healing?

Many sensations, best described as 'flow of energy':

- Warmth (from the healer's hands or an overall comforting type)
- Cold
- Tingling
- Other sensations (e.g. of movement, touch, pain coming to the surface)

Effects of healing:

Not always specific but often very important to the life of the patient. e.g.

- Reduced pain
- Deepening inner peace / Lightening of burden
- Alleviation of physical symptoms
- Sense of connectedness with the Universe
- Increased vitality

Case Study:

- David – who attended the Leeds Healing Centre. (He arrived looking very unkempt, having been referred to us by his MIND support worker)
- Depression, anxiety for 10 years. Not sleeping
- On anti-depressants.
- Had course of CBT
- At 'end of his tether'
- Relaxed well during 1st session & the following week said had slept well that night for the first time in ages
- Continued to attend weekly for 4 months, then approx. fortnightly for next 2 months
- Felt 'lighter', calmer and more content
- Panic attacks stopped
- No longer taking anti-depressants (with the agreement of his GP)
- Now coping with volunteering at local charity shop

What is the mechanism of healing?

The fact that the mechanism for healing is unknown is the main problem for its acceptance within the healthcare setting. Until a mechanism is robustly identified, healing will be derided as being merely a placebo effect, which I don't think it is. Let me explain why:

When I channel healing, I 'see' energies in mind's eye. When I was giving healing to a lady who had come to the Leeds Healing Centre, I saw a black cloud of 'negative' energy leave the lady through the top of her head on the right-hand side. When the healing had finished, I asked the lady how she had found the session and she said that she felt good and had felt 'something' leave through her head during the healing, indicating the exact spot that I had

seen this occur. Another healer, who had been watching, heard what the lady was saying to me and she told us that she too had seen the black cloud come out of the lady at that place on her head. Thus three people, separately, seem to have sensed the same energy.

Laboratory experiments have been conducted to explore the mechanism of healing. These findings support the notion that energy is coming in and being channelled by the healer. Electro-magnetic experiments show 'extraordinarily large' low frequency magnetic fields measured from hands of healers¹⁻² which are not derived from healers' internal body currents alone. They are low frequencies, in the same range as used in some electrotherapy to aid tissue healing³

Electro-encephalograms have demonstrated increased alpha brain waves in the healer and during the healing session it has been found that the patient's brain waves change to synchronise with that of the healer.⁴⁻⁵ Indeed, many studies have shown EEG interconnectivity between two individuals at a distance⁶. Whatever the healer is doing, this seems to be transmitted to the patient.

Distant Intentional Connection experiment using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) seems to support the notion of distant healing:⁵

- Distant Intention is defined as 'sending thoughts at a distance'
- Distant Intention healing was sent at random 2 minute intervals unknown to recipient (in sensory isolation from the healer)
- Highly statistically significant differences between send and control (no send) in activation of certain brain functioning in recipient

Thus, there seems to be evidence of an energetic connection between individuals (healer and recipient). But how does it work?

Oschman⁷ has an idea for a possible mechanism. In his 'model of the intelligent body', he considers that the body's connective tissue continues within the cell plasma, making a continuum, connecting every cell and vibrating with electro-magnetic energy. Each part connects with the other instantaneously and continuously (20 times faster than the central nervous system) and it is through this that the body functions. (Chemical transmission via synapses is too slow an explanation). He suggests that magnetic flow is best when everything is coherent and the body is healthy, and that this flow of electro-magnetic energy goes beyond the body (the aura) where there is an exchange with the environment. This allows people to receive healing vibrations or intentions. Certainly, many of us can, upon entering an empty room, 'know' when there has recently been an argument there. We can sense the negative energy through our aura. Equally, we can sense if someone has good or bad intentions towards us, irrespective of what they are saying or how they are acting to us.

To explain healing, perhaps we need to explore our reality in a new way, one that is increasingly being considered as being of a quantum nature in which

everything is interconnected. Thus, two objects remain connected through time and space, without communicating in any conventional way, long after their initial interaction has taken place (arguably, the initial interaction being at the time of the 'Big Bang'). Albert Einstein called this connection 'spooky action at a distance'.

Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity proposed that energy (photons) and matter (atoms) are different aspects of the same. Following on, Dean Radin has suggested that there is an entangled fabric of reality⁸ and that everything is connected: Bioelectromagnetic fields around our bodies are entangled with electromagnetic fields in the local environment and with photons (energy) from the rest of the universe.

Another possible reality is that of a holographic model⁹; that despite its apparent materiality, the universe is actually a 3-D image projecting from a level of reality beyond time and space. This idea was pioneered independently by physicist David Bohm and the neurophysiologist Karl Pribram. Bohm was a protégé of Einstein's and a respected quantum physicist. Both Bohm and Pribram independently arrived at their conclusions in order to make sense not only of all the phenomena encountered in quantum physics and other neurophysiological quandaries, but also paranormal and mystic experiences. This model is being used by cosmologists to mathematically model the universe.

Michael Talbot asks: 'Is it true what the mystics had been saying for centuries – that reality is 'maya', an illusion; that reality is really a vast, resonating symphony of wave forms, a 'frequency domain' which is transformed into the world as we know it only after it enters our senses?

Henry Stapp and John von Neuman concur. They state that the conscious mind directs a dynamic distribution of parallel virtual states into a single state of focused awareness. This opens the possibility that one person's mind/brain can cause the probabilistic brain states of another person or object (or other human organs) to preferentially collapse into selected states. This may be how the intention of healing can produce an effect.

At the moment we really do not know the true mechanism of reality, which makes it difficult to explain the mechanism of something as ethereal as healing. However, I like this quote from the English Biologist T. H. Huxley:

'Sit down before fact like a little child, and be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads, or you shall learn nothing.'

He also says '*I am too much of a sceptic to deny the possibility of anything*'.

Jack Angelo writes this about the mechanism of healing:

'The fundamental, underlying philosophy of spiritual healing centres on the notion of the connectedness of all at an 'energetic' level, which is

now supported by quantum physics. It is considered that healing, through the input of thought at an energetic level, can influence the harmony of the mind, body and spirit.¹⁰

For an acceptance of healing by the NHS, the understanding of the mechanism of healing is important for its credibility. However, from the point of view of the patient, it is the beneficial effects which matter, not how this was brought about. In the same way, I use my mobile phone to ring abroad and can speak to my friend as though she was in the same room. Yet I don't know the mechanism by which this occurs. I just know that it works.

Evidence for the effectiveness of spiritual healing

Jonas and Crawford describe at least 2,200 published reports on spiritual healing, prayer, energy medicine, mental intention effects, and distant healing intentionality¹¹. Many have poor methodology, however.

Anecdotally, healers say that it is unusual for people who have received several sessions of healing, not to derive some benefit, either in mind, body or spirit. Indeed, the NFSH Healing Trust writes: 'It is unusual for healing not to be helpful in some way'.

A few people experience an immediate effect. For example, people have felt depression lift or chronic pain disappear after the first healing session. However, a minority have no apparent benefit from healing. Possibly some of these people, having an investment in remaining ill, are reluctant to give up the sick role.

Audit evidence from the Positive Care Programme (www.positivecareprogramme.com) An audit of people who are pro complementary therapies, but not necessarily pro healing - has demonstrated:

- 87% (92/106) strongly agreed or agreed that healing had helped them
- 12% (13/106) were 'not sure' (Of these, the majority had only had 1 or 2 sessions)
- 1 person disagreed

Dan Benor was the first to look at healing seriously as a research subject. He reviewed 155 controlled studies¹² using a wide range of experimental subjects (enzymes, micro-organisms, cells, plants, animals and humans). Over half produced statistically significant results supporting the healing effect. However his review demonstrated a dearth of rigorous, controlled studies in human illness.

There have been two reviews of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of healing in humans. In each, approximately half the trials demonstrated statistically significant effects compared to controls:

- Neil Abbott's review was of 22 published papers¹³ - 10 papers demonstrated a significant effect of healing.
- Astin, Harkness and Ernst's review was of 23 trials which involved 2,774 patients. ¹⁴ - 13 (57%) studies yielded statistically significant treatment effects; 9 demonstrated no effect over controls and 1 showed a negative effect.

Many of the trials had poor methodology or trial design, however, including small sample sizes and inadequate reporting.

An RCT of the effect of spiritual healing on chronic pain¹⁵ did not demonstrate statistically significant reduction in pain (which was the primary endpoint). It did show large, non-specific effects and psychological benefits which were significantly different compared to the controls. The trial was criticised¹⁶, however, on a number of points, but especially for the design which assumed a very large effect size, which was considered inappropriate for chronic pain. The non-specific effects reported included 'changes' in pain and 'unusual' sensations (such as seeing colours / light). These non-specific effects were dismissed as being 'part of the folklore of healing'.

To avoid invalid evaluation in the investigation of spiritual healing, research methods need to take account of the aim of healing – not only to relieve symptoms and restore wellness but to help individuals in a process of self healing within a holistic view of health. Reductionist research methods usually do not investigate this. For example, a lady said about her healing session:

'When X (the healer) put her hand on my back, I thought about something bad that had happened to me in the past. (I hadn't been thinking about it and it surprised me that I suddenly thought about it) But I just had a realisation that this was not part of me anymore, I could let it go. I need to move on'.

She had attended for healing to help her back pain. Her 'non-specific effect' from the healing would not have been noted in a trial looking at pain reduction.

There are a number of methodological challenges to conducting randomised, controlled trials¹⁷ to investigate the effectiveness of spiritual healing.

Firstly, in the sampling, there are problems with:

Generalisability Since conventional medical care is generally separate from the delivery of healing, patients recruited into a trial may differ from typical patients who attend for healing, for example, in their belief systems or coping mechanisms and this might affect treatment outcomes.

Therapeutic Expectation If there is expectation of therapeutic gain because of a belief in the benefit of healing, this might lead to bias of results in trials which are not blinded.

Wide range of symptoms People who attend for healing often do so not because they have a specific disease but because, for example, they 'feel tired' or 'lack energy'. Therefore a trial about the effectiveness of healing based on a specific disease may not have relevance.

Secondly, there can be problems with the trial treatment:

Standardisation Healing treatment is often individualised and the practitioner is explicitly recognised as a component of the treatment, thus making treatment standardisation within trials a potential problem, requiring, e.g. stratification by individual healer in the randomisation.

Influence of practitioner and user The healing act is not just a set of techniques but aims to improve the patient's healing process in a holistic sense. It is often difficult to retain the human experience as central within a reductionist research assessment.

Controls Sham controls are artificial experiences which distort practice. Often blinding is not possible, needing pragmatic trials with conventional medical practice as the control.

Understanding the healing process What aspect provides benefit in healing? Is it the intent to heal, the channelling of energy, the users' expectations, the relationship with the healer, the accompanying non-judgemental listening to the patient? Or are all important?

Thirdly, there can be problems with outcome measures:

Appropriate outcome measures Noteworthy changes after healing such as spiritual change or personal growth might not be measurable. Indeed, choice of RCT outcome measures may make a substantial difference to conclusions on efficacy.

Illness role According to some philosophies, illness indicates an imbalance in the body, mind or spirit and illness draws attention to this. (e.g. we all know people who get a cold or a backache when stressed). Research needs to capture the lifestyle changes which people may make when they receive healing and any resultant improvements in health.

Chronic illness Long-term follow-up is needed for people with long-term conditions as often there is a relapsing and remitting pattern to the disease and change is usually gradual and subtle. Over time, factors other than the trial treatments could bring about the observed effects.

Variations in experience Treatment may be effective immediately for one person but take a few weeks for another. Trial design needs to take these variations into account.

For evidence based decision making and practice, the challenge is to fuse the philosophical concerns of complementary therapists with high standards of methodological rigour.

The place of healing in modern healthcare

The House of Lord's Select Committee on Science and Technology investigated Complementary and Alternative Medicine and its application in healthcare, interviewing many experts in the field. Their report on Complementary and Alternative Medicine categorised healing as a 'Group 2' therapy,¹⁸ as it is complementary to conventional medicine and does not claim to diagnose illness.

Spiritual Healing is a popular complementary therapy:

- Approximately 14,000 healers are registered with the main healing organisations
- Medical doctors refer patients to healers
- It is practiced within the NHS (GP practices, cancer units, hospices, mental health hospitals)
- There are NFSH Healing Trust Healing Centres throughout UK
- Within the NHS, healers work not just as volunteers, but some (although only a few at present) are also employed by the NHS.

If healing is to have an established place within modern healthcare, we need better research, adequate training of healers, high professional standards and clinical governance.

If you wish to refer patients for healing, you might like to contact the NFSH Healing Trust (Charity No 1094702) for the following reasons:

- It is the largest and oldest membership organisation of Spiritual Healers in the UK
- It has national standards of training by accredited trainers
- There is a minimum 2 years' training period with national standards of final assessment, emphasising the self-development of the healer and professional standards
- It holds a professional Code of Conduct, with disciplinary procedures, professional insurance
- There are over 50 Healing Centres throughout the UK, staffed by volunteer members

Since giving this talk, the NFSH Healing Trust now provides a new healer membership course for nurses and medical professionals. This is a shortened course (four days of theory), to take into account advanced prior learning. There is then mentoring with an experienced healer member for a minimum of 12 months. For more information, contact the NFSH Healing Trust:

NFSH The Healing Trust, 21 York Road, Northampton, NN1 5QG, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1604 603247, Fax: +44 (0)1604 603534

Appendix

Visualisation to Raise Energetic Vibrations

This can be done sitting or standing.

Ground yourself by focusing your mind on where the soles of your feet touch the ground. Feel the exchange of energy at that point, between your feet and the ground beneath. Feel the Earth supporting you.

Now take the focus of your attention into yourself, to the energy, the spark of light that is the real you, your Life Force, your Soul. Do not worry if you cannot 'see' this, just feel or know that this energy is there within your body.

Now bring your attention upwards into the Universe, until you see or sense a distant point of Light - the light of the Divine, the source of peace, love, healing and joy. Hold the intention of connecting that Light with your Life Force. As the Divine Light flows down towards you, allow this connection to happen. Feel it, see it, sense or just 'know' that this powerful Divine energy is entering your Soul, strengthening it, making you feel complete.

Now allow this Light to continue expanding outwards, filling every cell of your body, nourishing and healing it.

Imagine the Light expanding further, beyond the boundaries of your body about an arm's length in every direction - on either side, over your head and beneath your feet, and especially, behind you. Imagine this powerful, peaceful, loving, energising Light filling you and finally surrounding you, as a protective sphere.

Now bring your attention back to the soles of your feet and feel that connection with the earth. Feel grounded and that your energies are now back down at an appropriate level for normal daily life and open your eyes.

This is a very powerful, healing visualisation as it raises your energetic vibrations with Divine Light, from within. Do this regularly throughout the day, as often as is helpful.

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