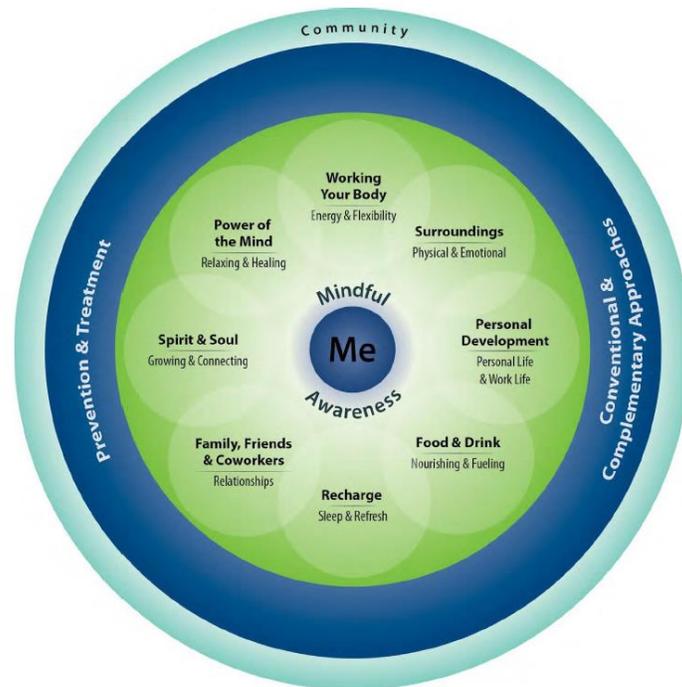


WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Advancing Skills in the Delivery of
Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

Energy Medicine (Biofield Therapies) Clinical Tool



This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the *Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being*. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.

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Clinical Tool

This clinical tool will focus on energy medicine and its relevance to Whole Health care. After providing some overall background, the ECHO mnemonic (Efficacy, Costs, Harms, Opinions—see the **Deciding if an Approach is Worth Using: The E.C.H.O. Mnemonic** clinical tool) will be used to summarize information clinicians can use to do the following:

- Educate patients about these therapies and have meaningful discussions with patients about them
- Make informed referrals to various energy medicine practitioners
- Experience a biofield therapy themselves, if desired

Energy Medicine: A Background

Physics teaches that energy exists as either the ability to do work (potential energy) or as motion (kinetic energy). Biochemistry discusses energy in terms of the adenosine triphosphate (ATP) molecule. Physics describes a broad spectrum of energy, with wavelengths that have different properties. We know that the body emits and is affected by many forms of energy, and these are widely used in conventional medicine. Consider, for example, ECGs, EEGs, EMGs, MRIs, and so on. But what does it mean to talk about “energy medicine”?

Energy medicine has been practiced for millennia. It is a key component of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) where energy is referred to as qi or chi. It is also central to Ayurvedic medicine, traditional Indian medicine (where it is known as prana), as well as in the healing traditions of many indigenous cultures. Despite the fact that they are prevalent, energy medicine modalities are perhaps among the most mysterious of the complementary approaches.

Energy medicine approaches are also highly controversial. There has been ongoing debate about whether energy medicine research should be supported by the National Institutes of Health’s National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), but it was originally listed by NCCAM as one of the five overall classes of CAM therapies.¹ Part of this controversy arises because the mechanism of action is unclear.

Use Patterns

About 0.5% of the United States population was found to use energy medicine (and more specifically, Reiki, just one of many types of energy medicine) in the 2007 National Health Information Survey.² A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in 2002 found that 0.5% of participants had used qi gong, and 1% had used Reiki.³ The 2011 Healthcare Analysis and Information Group (HAIG) survey found that 10 of 141 (7%) VA systems offer some form of energy medicine to Veterans.¹

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Energy healing can complement conventional therapies. Many hospitals incorporate Reiki, therapeutic touch, or healing touch into patient care. It is most often used to help people before or after surgery or cancer treatment. These approaches are most commonly introduced by nursing staff. In fact, therapeutic touch and healing touch, two of the most widely used energy medicine practices, are offered primarily by nurses.

Licensure and Education

Training in various energy medicine modalities varies. Some practices, such as healing touch, require four or more years of training, and learners must document hundreds of hours of patient care time prior to certification. Training takes four years. In contrast, some forms of Reiki are taught over the course of just a few weekends (though it should be noted other forms of Reiki take years to master). A study in 2005 mentioned that over 50 medical facilities in the United States offer energy medicine in some form, and this number has continued to increase.⁴

Many biofield therapy practitioners describe what they do as a gift that they have cultivated without formal training. For many practitioners, their exposure to energy medicine was precipitated by some sort of health crisis, or healer's journey, as many of them describe it. It was in seeking healing for themselves that their skills began to develop.

Philosophy and Principles

Energy medicine has been defined as follows:

The term energy medicine derives from the perceptions and beliefs of therapists and patients that there are subtle, biologic energies that surround and permeate the body. It is suggested that these energies may be accessed in various ways through CAM for diagnostic and therapeutic interventions.⁵

The energy field of the body is sometimes referred to as the "subtle energy field" or the "biofield." The terms "biofield therapy" and "energy medicine modality" are often used interchangeably. Energy medicine practitioners hold that the energy body has a direct effect on overall health; problems with the energy body are said to precede physical problems.⁶ Conversely, healing the energy body can lead to subsequent physical, emotional, and mental healing.

Energy anatomy

The energy body is described as having its own anatomy, but there are variations in terms of how it is described within different schools, or systems, of energy medicine.

- The field around the body, often referred to as the *aura*, is often described as having multiple layers that serve different functions.
- The *chakras* are described as centers of energy located along the spinal column and other parts of the body, such as the palms and soles. Different chakras are

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believed to have different associated colors, sounds, and health-related roles. See Table 1 for a more detailed description.

- *Meridians* are channels on the surface of and deep into the body, through which energy flows.

In addition to energy medicine approaches, these terms are used widely in other types of healing as well, including Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine.

Table 1. The Chakras^{7*}			
Chakra Name(s)	Location in the body	Color	Associated Issues
First (Root)	Base of spine, in front of the coccyx	Red	Physical health; security; the material world; body awareness
Second	Lower abdomen, just below belly button	Orange	Emotions, especially toward oneself; reproduction; creativity
Third	Solar plexus—upper abdomen, just below the breastbone	Yellow	Mental well-being; logic; will; sense of control
Fourth	Heart area, but midline rather than to the left	Green (sometimes rose)	Relationships, including romantic love; connections to others; compassion
Fifth	Throat, just above the space between the collar bones	Blue (sometimes turquoise)	Expression; communication; speaking and listening
Sixth (third eye)	Center of forehead, above and between the eyebrows	Indigo or violet	Seeing and vision; perception; intuition; dreaming
Seventh (crown)	Scalp, top and center where the posterior soft spot was	Purple or white	Spirituality; connection with a higher power; unity
Eighth and above	Vary greatly among traditions: some describe an 8 th chakra 6-12 inches over the 7 th and a 9 th 6-12 inches below the feet; some systems describe a 10 th and an 11 th going even farther up overhead	Varies (the one below the feet is said to be brown)	Variable: 8 th is sometimes described as a point where the boundaries of ego end; Tied to past lives or collective consciousness in some systems 9 th may be tied to grounding, connection with the earth

*There is a lot of variability in terms of where different schools of thought locate the chakras and the functions they are said to have. The word *chakra* means “wheel” in Sanskrit, and they are described as spinning. Some describe them as spheres; others describe them as cones that emerge from the body. Each chakra is linked to different sounds and glands as well. Chakras are also located in other areas of the body, such as in the palms and soles, as well as over other joints and the liver and spleen. For more information on how energetic anatomy is conceptualized in different traditions, see the various resources at the end of this document.

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Mechanism of action

A number of mechanisms of action have been proposed for biofield therapies. Some of these include:⁷

- Healing alters the electromagnetic field of the body.
- Energy therapies decrease entropy.
- An energy therapist helps a person to entrain (synchronize) with Earth's magnetic field.
- Energy is transmitted through the connective tissue matrix.
- A practitioner's vibration entrains (synchronizes) with that of the recipient and causes both to have a similar—and healthier—vibration.

Diagnosis

Many energy workers begin by having people complete a detailed intake form. They may use a variety of techniques to perceive the biofield. Most of them have a preferred sensory approach by which they receive information. Some energy practitioners say they see energy, where others feel it by touch or hear information that directs them as they work with others. Intuition is highly valued as a way of knowing, and care is highly individualized based on a person's narrative, past experiences, and energy body patterns. Some energy medicine practitioners work with pendulums, applied kinesiology (testing muscle strength to verify the validity of statements), or tuning forks.

Therapies and interventions

Many biofield therapists believe they can maneuver the energy body through various means. Some claim to do so simply by directing their intention; others use their hands. Stones and crystals, tuning forks, colors, sound, visualization exercises, chanting, breathing practices, and many other approaches may also be used. Nonlocality, the idea that objects or people can affect each other "outside of time and space," is often mentioned. Some practitioners hold they can do healings without being in physical proximity to the person seeking their care. This is known as "distance healing."

Some healers claim to be assisted by nonphysical beings, sometimes referred to as guides, who help support the healing process. Some healers also discuss the roles played by past life experiences, reincarnation, or karma.

Varieties of energy medicine

Originally, NCCAM classed energy medicine approaches into two main groups:

1. Veritable energy modalities make use of energy that is measurable with conventional technology. Examples include electricity or magnetic force.
2. Putative energy modalities involve working with energy that has not been definitively measured. Among these modalities are Reiki, healing touch, therapeutic touch, and quantum touch. Using acupuncture to alter the flow of qi, a central part of therapy in TCM, is another example. Practitioners of these approaches hold that they can perceive and/or maneuver subtle energy in various ways.

Try It Out: Awareness of Your Energy Field

There are two popular exercises that are often used by energy medicine teachers to help people become aware of their energy fields. Give them a try, and see if you notice anything.

1. Feeling the biofield.

- Rub your hands together, like you are trying to warm them by a fire, as fast as you can for 10 seconds.
- Note the sensations you feel as you separate your hands apart 6 inches or so and then start to push the palms slowly back toward each other, like you are clapping in slow motion.

Many people notice, with practice, that the hands warm up or seem to repel each other when they move closer together.

2. Seeing the biofield.

This is most likely to be work for beginners in low lighting, such as when the sun is just coming up or going down. It also helps to do it in front of a neutral background, like a white wall.

- Place your hands, in front of you, palms up. There should be at least 5 feet of open space behind your hands.
- Stare past your hands, as though you are looking at the floor or a wall several feet away.
- Move your hands at the wrists so that the fingertips of each hand are pointed toward each other. Your palms should still be up. The middle fingertips should be pointed toward each other, separated by a distance of $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch.
- With your eyes still focused through the space between the fingertips into the distance, slowly move your hands back and forth, first away from each other and then closer together.
- Remembering to continue to focus your gaze past your hands, take note of what you see.

Many people report seeing streamers of energy moving from the fingertips on the left to the ones on the right, and vice versa. Some people note color (blue or gray, most commonly) and others see a “shimmer,” much like the distortion in the light caused by heat rising off of hot pavement.

A listing of specific energy healing modalities, with descriptions and related websites, are outlined in Table 2.⁷ Those listed are the ones that are most frequently used in the United States, but the list is by no means comprehensive.

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Table 2. Varieties of Energy Healing*

Name	Description	Website
Acupuncture and acupressure	Needles are inserted into points along meridians, or energy channels, within the body. In acupressure, the points are stimulated by touch.	Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine clinical tool http://www.yinyanghouse.com/
Barbara Brennan School of Healing	Focuses on energy healing according to detailed descriptions of energy anatomy and flow. This is an example of an energy healing modality that has been built upon the experiences and techniques of a specific teacher.	http://www.barbarabrennan.com/
Emotional freedom technique, thought field therapy	Tapping with the fingers over of various meridian points is said to release stored negative emotional energy.	http://www.emofree.com/ http://www.rogercallahan.com/index.php
Flower essences	Extracts from various flowers are said to influence people according to the nature/energy of the plants they contain.	http://www.bachcentre.com/
Healing touch	Developed in the 1980s by Janet Mentgen, a registered nurse. The hands are used to maneuver the energy field, with a particular emphasis on the chakras. Extensive instruction and training required for certification.	http://www.healingtouchinternational.org/
Polarity therapy	Combines lifestyle modifications and other techniques to optimize the health of the energy field.	http://www.polaritytherapy.org/
Quantum touch	Popularized in books by Richard Gordon. Energy is directed through intention, breath, and other techniques. Strong emphasis on treating musculoskeletal issues, among others.	http://www.quantumtouch.com/
Reiki	Originated in Japan. Trainees are given “attunements” to allow them to pass universal healing energy through themselves to others. Works with specific healing symbols.	http://www.reiki.com/
Shamanism	Often classed as a spiritual, rather than energetic, modality. Shamans use rituals, helpful spirits, journeys to the spirit world, or other techniques to gather information needed to bring about healing.	http://www.shamanresource.com/

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Therapeutic touch	Developed by Dolores Krieger, a nurse, and Dora Kunz in the 1970s. Light touch is used to influence the biofield. Widely used in hospital settings by nurses.	http://www.therapeutictouch.org/
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Efficacy

Natural Standard concludes that there is not enough data to give A or B ratings of efficacy for any energy therapies.⁸ A 2011 German review also concluded that existing research at the time did not allow conclusions to be made regarding the efficacy of energy medicine.⁹ An overall summary of key study findings is provided below.⁷ Note that these are based on systematic reviews, when possible, but for many therapies research remains scarce.

Energy Medicine Research Findings

The following is a summary of some of the key research related to energy medicine. They are separated according to which type (or types) of biofield therapy was studied.

General studies

- A 2010 review of 67 studies found that biofield therapies, in general, have promise as complementary interventions for reducing pain intensity, anxiety, and, for people with dementia, their level of agitation.¹⁰
- A 2008 Cochrane review concluded, from studies of a total of 1,153 patients receiving healing touch, therapeutic touch, or Reiki, that pain was reduced, at least to a modest degree. On the 10-point rating scale, pain was reduced by 0.83 points (95% CI, -1.16 to -0.5).¹¹
- A research survey done in 2003, which reviewed 2,200 published reports found that 11 of 19 trials of energy healing, $n = 1,122$, showed positive effects.¹² The Cohen's D was 0.6. (An effect size of 0.2-0.3 is small, 0.5-0.8 is medium, and 0.8 and above is large.)

Therapeutic touch (TT)

- A 2010 study found improvement in pain and fatigue in 90 people going through chemotherapy.¹³
- Another 2010 small study ($n = 21$) found it decreases pain, cortisol, and levels of natural killer cells.¹⁴
- A Cochrane review, also from 2010, found TT *not* helpful for acute wound healing. (Two of 3 trials showed improvement, but methodological quality was poor.)
- A 2014 Cochrane review concluded that "there is no robust evidence that therapeutic touch promotes healing of acute wounds."¹⁵

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Reiki

- While it stated that more study was needed, a 2014 review concluded that Reiki “may be effective” for pain and anxiety.¹⁶ Effect sizes (an effect size of 0.2-0.3 is small, 0.5-0.8 is medium, and 0.8 and above is large) were calculated as follows:
 - $d = 0.32$ for pain in cancer patients
 - $d = 0.45$ for pain in community dwelling adults
- Reiki improved heart rate variability and emotional state for patients on a Yale Hospital cardiology ward.¹⁷
- A 2007 review found that Reiki was beneficial for depression in 1 of 4 studies, chronic pain in 1 of 3 studies, and in the only study of its use for acute pain.¹⁸
- A 2009 review of 12 studies found that 9 had significant findings of benefit for Reiki for various indications, but 11 of them were rated as poor quality.¹⁹

Healing touch (HT)

- A 2012 study of 123 combat-exposed, returning, active-duty military with PTSD were randomized to receive HT and guided imagery or treatment as usual.²⁰ There was a statistically significant reduction in PTSD symptoms and depression in the treatment group.
- A 2004 review of 30 studies concluded that HT holds promise, but more research is needed.²¹
- In 78 women with gynecologic cancers undergoing radiation therapy, HT improved vitality and physical function and decreased pain.²²
- In patients recovering from cardiac bypass surgery, HT decreased anxiety and length of stay. It did not affect use of pain medications or antiemetics.²³

Even though the research behind many biofield therapies is not robust, they are relatively free of adverse effects. We know that many chronic diseases are exacerbated by anxiety and stress, so if energy modalities are effective in helping patients to relax then these approaches are worth considering.

Costs

Costs for energy medicine sessions vary. Most sessions cost between \$50 and \$200 per hour, with the lower end of this range being more common. The initial visit may cost more, given that it often takes more time. Patients should be reminded that most practitioners will ask them to do multiple sessions. Within the VA, many volunteer organizations want to offer Reiki to patients and many VA nurses are being trained in HT through a national grant. Therefore, there may not be a cost to Veterans where this is offered in the hospital.

Harms

In general, biofield therapies are thought to be quite safe. There are no reports of these interventions leading to morbidity of any significant duration. Problems may arise if a person defers vital biomedical interventions for an extended period of time to pursue energy modalities in their place.

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During an energy medicine session, a patient may perceive physical sensations, such as tingling, temperature changes, pressure, or other sensory impressions. Pain is unlikely. Intense emotional experiences and memories may also surface, so energy medicine should be used with care in people with severe mental health disorders.

Opinions

This is one area in particular where a clinician feels it is difficult to advise patients, if it is felt that his or her opinions are markedly different from a patient's. To maintain a helpful therapeutic relationship, it is important for a clinician to ensure that a patient's religious or spiritual perspectives do not cause them to feel discomfort with discussing biofield approaches.

Tips about Energy Medicine from an Integrative Medicine Clinician

I frequently encourage patients to use energy medicine as an adjunct to what they are doing in conventional medicine. It is important to have a sense of the different therapies that are out there, especially Reiki, healing touch, and therapeutic touch, which you are most likely to see. I find that skill and effectiveness vary greatly from one energy practitioner to the next, so I would encourage anyone who is interested in these approaches to try them for themselves first, and trust their instincts; if a particular provider does not feel like a good fit, look for someone else.

I have seen many patients do well with energy medicine when they have certain conditions that are not easily explained by medical science. I find that it often works well for people with chronic pain. A lot of what people experience is going back to work with historical issues—emotional and other traumas, challenging relationships, and such. It helps a great deal with anxiety and depression for many people.

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Additional Resources

Books

- Brennan BA. *Hands of Light: A Guide to Healing Through the Human Energy Field*. New York: Bantam Dell; 1993.
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Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

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<http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php>

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