



Photo Courtesy of Jane Van De Velde

Reiki in a Cancer Center

BY JANE VAN DE VELDE, DNP, RN

A DIAGNOSIS OF CANCER with subsequent treatment is life changing, overwhelming and sometimes traumatizing for anyone who has had this experience. People with cancer require care and support on every level—body, mind, and spirit. Use of complementary and integrative modalities is becoming increasingly common as people diagnosed with cancer seek more holistic and non-invasive means of supporting their overall healing process (Matthews, et al., 2007; Miles, 2007; & Yates, et al., 2005).

Reiki is a holistic, complementary healing practice that is being embraced by the cancer support services community throughout the United States. In the Chicago metropolitan area, a number of nonprofit cancer support centers offer Reiki services and classes to participants, e.g., Wellness House (Hinsdale, IL); Wellness Place (Palatine, IL); Living Well Cancer Resource Center (Geneva, IL); and Cancer Support Center (Homewood, IL). In Naperville, IL, Edward Hospital's cancer treatment center holds a monthly Reiki clinic that began in 2004. As part of my own Reiki practice, I offer weekly sessions as a volunteer and teach occasional Reiki classes at Wellness House. In the past five years, I have learned many valuable lessons from this client group.

Stages of the Cancer Experience

Based on my observations at Wellness House, I have found the experience of cancer to be a series of stages: 1) initial diagnosis and treatment; 2) "on the mend"; 3) survivorship; 4) recurrence; and 5) palliative & hospice care.

Dealing with an initial diagnosis of cancer is an emotional, chaotic time for people. They need to find appropriate medical care, connect with new physicians and make decisions about initial treatment, which may include surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation. Treatment may last a few months or more than a year.

When treatment is completed, people begin a "mending" and healing process. They may need to gain weight, grow their hair back and recover strength and stamina. During this time, feelings of abandonment or panic are not unusual, when the structure and care people received during the treatment phase has ended.

In the survivor phase, people return to their normal life. They go back to work and to their daily routines and activities. People begin to discover a "new normal" following the intensity of cancer treatment. Their hope is that the cancer is cured and they will stay in remission.

Unfortunately, cancer can sometimes return and metastasize. In recurrence, people face the trauma of starting over with treatment. And finally, the palliative and hospice care phase indicates end-stage disease with no further medical options for cure or remission. The focus of care is on comfort, pain control and symptom management.

Client Experience of Cancer

Cancer, in a sense, is holistic because it affects people on every level—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. My clients and students often report a variety of physical symptoms associated with their cancer diagnosis or as side effects to their treatments. Physical symptoms may include muscle aches, fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbance, weight loss, hair loss and peripheral neuropathy. Mental, emotional and spiritual symptoms can also occur during initial diagnosis and treatment, and can persist long after treatment is completed. Reported symptoms include fear, anger, worry, anxiety, depression and loss of faith.

The overall approach to cancer care needs to be holistic, combining the best of traditional Western medicine with integrative and complementary modalities. Reiki fits well into this paradigm. There are many ways in which we can offer our Reiki knowledge, skills and compassion to people and families dealing with a cancer diagnosis. There are both anecdotal reports and beginning research that support the use of Reiki in providing relief for the physical and mental/emotional effects of cancer (Miles, 2003; Shore, 2004). Reiki sessions, classes and self-treatment can be valuable tools and resources for anyone at any point throughout this experience, which often spans years. We can adapt many aspects of Reiki practice to specifically meet the needs of people with cancer. In the following sections, I will share what I have learned as a Reiki practitioner and teacher in working with this client group.

Reiki Sessions

Over the past five years, I have offered nearly 700 Reiki sessions at Wellness House, a nonprofit cancer support center. Each client receives a 45 minute full body Reiki session using the standard hand positions. At the client's initial appointment, I explain the nature of Reiki and how the session will be conducted. Then I ask the question, "Why are you coming to Wellness House?" At this point, most clients will share their cancer diagnosis with me.

This information helps me in focusing my Reiki hands. However, there have been a few clients who have chosen not to give me this information, and I do not ask directly, respecting their privacy.

In working with all these clients, I have learned to both observe and listen to them very closely. As I scan a client's energy field, asking to be guided to the cause, and begin the hand positions, I trust in the guidance of Reiki and that the client is receiving exactly what is needed. Clients often find comfort in knowing that I am placing my Reiki hands on or over the area where the cancer is located. I worked with one client who was diagnosed with liver cancer and we spent our Reiki sessions "loving her liver" with my hands on her right upper abdomen.

I ask clients for a healing intention, e.g., "How would you like the Reiki to help you today?" This gives them an opportunity to participate and give some direction to the session. I also ask if they are experiencing any pain or discomfort so I can focus on those areas with other techniques such as sweeping and pain drain. I begin and end each session with head to toe sweeping to clear clients' energy fields especially if they are in active treatment with chemotherapy or radiation. I explain that we hold everything in our energy fields—our worries, fears, pain, anxiety as well joy, peace and happiness. While I am sweeping, I suggest they use this as an opportunity to release anything that does not serve them.

Clients sometimes feel that their bodies have betrayed them and express negative thoughts about their colons, livers, breasts or lungs. I gently recommend that they talk to their body, offering additional love and support to those areas which are so in need of healing.

If clients have taken a Reiki class, I encourage them to self-treat during the session. I use this opportunity to discuss daily practice and to answer any questions that they might have about Reiki. Finally, I document all my sessions (Van De Velde, 2009). This helps me with the continuity of care that I provide my clients and is part of a professional Reiki practice. If someone comes infrequently, my documentation refreshes my memory about the client before the session begins.

One additional note—I wear no perfume nor do I use any aromatherapy when working with clients at Wellness House. Chemotherapy can cause sensitivity to many fragrances, including hand sanitizer.

Compassionate Listening

Reiki can open people emotionally, bringing forth thoughts and feelings that have been repressed. People dealing with cancer sometimes need to share their stories. I have some clients who talk throughout their sessions as I quietly go through the hand positions. I find that conversation does not interfere with the session but can actually contribute to the overall healing process.

Reiki practitioners who are licensed as nurses, social workers, counselors and teachers have acquired listening skills as part of their professional practice. However, good listening requires very little talking and these skills can be developed by anyone. Basic components of compassionate listening during a Reiki session include:

- Listening with empathy and without judgment
- Maintaining eye contact and responding appropriately
- Letting your client know that you are paying attention to them
- Not asking for details or interrupting; not telling your own stories
- Being quietly present and continuing to offer the Reiki

We do need to be aware of our Reiki scope of practice in situations where clients share any personal information. As Reiki practitioners, we do not diagnose, prescribe or offer advice or solutions. We are simply giving people the opportunity to connect with Reiki for purposes of their own personal healing. It is also very important to maintain client confidentiality. Whatever information our clients disclose during a Reiki session is private and not to be shared with others.

Reiki Classes

Reiki is an easily learned self-care tool that can quickly offer relaxation, stress reduction and symptom relief for people with cancer. Reiki class for these students is empowering and can be taken at any point in their cancer experience including during active treatment and palliative or hospice care. I have learned a number of lessons in teaching these Reiki classes:

1. Dividing eight hour classes into two or three sessions: Students who are in active treatment or dealing with a recurrence of cancer may not have the stamina to attend a full day class.
2. Giving the Reiki attunement at the first class session: Students are then able to self-treat with Reiki between sessions. They return the following week with questions and experiences that help to reinforce and encourage their daily Reiki practice. Note: individuals can safely receive Reiki attunements while undergoing chemotherapy or radiation.
3. Offering adequate breaks: These students can find lengthy sitting times to be uncomfortable. I encourage them to move around and stand if needed even while the instructor is talking.
4. Using no scented candles, aromatherapy or perfumes: Again, chemotherapy can cause intolerance to many scents.
5. Focusing on class material: Reiki class is not a therapeutic support group in which people share their personal stories. At the first session, I have students briefly introduce themselves by sharing just their names as well as their favorite color or flower. We also participate in energy circles and group hugs to encourage group unity. Students often connect with each other meaningfully during breaks and before or after class. However, during class time, we focus on learning about Reiki and energy work.

Cancer Center Reiki Stories

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The following stories are from people whose lives have been touched by cancer. Jeannine and Tory both took Reiki class from me while they were receiving chemotherapy treatment. They eloquently describe how Reiki has helped them in numerous ways—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Carilynn was my Reiki client and student several years ago. Her story illustrates the power of Reiki in supporting and comforting people receiving palliative and hospice care.

Jeannine

"I took my first Reiki class when I was mid-way through a six month course of chemotherapy for colon cancer. The class itself was a beautiful experience, and I found myself looking forward to each of the sessions. Reiki was presented to us as complementary to the other treatments—never as the only one or best one. It was so refreshing to learn something I could do for myself when I had time in a way that was best for me.

Reiki has become a part of my daily life. During the final three months of chemotherapy, I practiced Reiki during treatments at my doctor's office, and during the subsequent days wearing the chemo pump. It's simple and private. I also practiced before bed, and often when waking in the morning. There is no set time and that is part of the beauty. A year later, I'm still practicing Reiki at least once a day. Looking back, I know that Reiki was one of the tools that helped ease my treatment. In talking to other cancer survivors who had a similar course of treatment, I appear to have had a more gentle reaction.

I experienced my 'life' while undergoing treatment for cancer. I enjoyed my two-year-old grandson and anticipated the birth of my granddaughter. Reiki helped calm me while I sorted through the myriad of medical, dietary, exercise and life style recommendations and decided which I could incorporate into my life. Reiki empowered me by giving me the tools to do something for myself while I was being bombarded by the drugs necessary to rid my body of cancer. And Reiki continues to enhance the quality of my life."

Tory

"I took Reiki class when I was in the midst of my chemotherapy regimen. I have since practiced on a daily basis, and Reiki has changed my life in many ways. During chemotherapy, it greatly reduced my nausea, provided relaxation that allowed me to sleep more normally, and lessened my need for pain medications. In essence, it provided me with a tool to reclaim myself.

Since completing treatment, Reiki has continued to change my life in significant ways. Whenever I find myself just a little off kilter, scared or upset, a little Reiki brings me right back to center. Reiki has reconnected me to my spiritual self and opened doors I didn't even realize were there. It has profoundly changed my outlook on both life and the afterlife, and it has also brought the most beautiful people into my life. Reiki has allowed me to rebuild myself both physically and spiritually, and now I walk the path I was meant to walk."

Carilynn

I worked with Carilynn from October until May. I visited her at home for Reiki sessions while she was receiving palliative care for metastatic breast cancer. She was 50 years old and had been dealing with cancer for eight years. Carilynn was a lovely woman, a wife, mother, artist and registered nurse. We connected immediately.

Carilynn loved Reiki. She would always greet me at the door with a pink knitted cap on her head and a big smile on her face. She would settle into her recliner chair in the living

room and I would begin her session. She often talked quietly as I offered Reiki to her. She shared a lot about herself, her family and her cancer journey. She was also interested in me, my family and my Reiki practice. She seemed to enjoy having "back and forth" conversation as part of her session.

Carilynn felt that receiving Reiki made a difference for her as she was faced with many ongoing treatment decisions and insurance issues. She told me that the Reiki kept her calm and peaceful, and helped her "navigate the speed bumps of life."

Carilynn then decided that she wanted to take Reiki class so that she could self-treat. In March—just two months before she died—Carilynn took an abbreviated Reiki Level I class. Her stamina was limited, so I condensed the material into four hours. She then began to self-treat every day. Carilynn started on a new chemotherapy regimen just after her attunement. She told me that Reiki was helping her manage the side effects and sleep better at night. She felt calmer and less anxious. She said, "Sometimes I hear Tibetan bells while I'm doing Reiki." When I came to visit for sessions, she would self-treat as I offered Reiki to her.

Carilynn entered hospice care at the beginning of May and was gone within a week. On my second to last visit, she was peaceful, and told me that Reiki had helped her make the decision to accept hospice care. On my last visit, I offered Reiki to Carilynn in the morning and she died peacefully at home that same afternoon. ■

Reiki Self-Treatment

Daily self-treatment is fundamental to Reiki practice and my goal in class is to show people how to weave Reiki into their day-to-day lives. The key is simplicity—making it easy for people to do so. I recently met a woman, Nancy, who upon finishing treatment for colon cancer had taken a Reiki Level I class. In her class handouts, she was given pictures of Reiki hand positions but they were not demonstrated or practiced during the class. She came away with the impression that the only way she could self-treat was by using all the hand positions each time. She told me that she was confused, saying, “I don’t know what to do.”

In my classes, hand positions are both demonstrated and practiced. I emphasize that students can choose to use all the hand positions in self-treating or just the ones that feel appropriate to them at the moment. We talk about how Reiki can be practiced discreetly, anytime, anywhere, as well as the importance of trusting one’s intuition. I give numerous examples of daily practice that include some of the following:

- Connecting to Reiki at bedtime or early morning with hands comfortably placed on the physical body
- Placing hands where it hurts or where it feels good
- Self-treating for any amount of time, whether 30 seconds, ten minutes or an hour
- Multi-tasking, e.g., self-treating while watching television or movies, sitting in meetings or during church services, waiting in physician offices, riding in the car
- Self-treating during chemotherapy, radiation or diagnostic tests
- Nancy repeated her Reiki Level I class with me and came away feeling renewed and confident. It is important for Reiki Master Teachers to emphasize that daily practice will enable people to realize the full benefits of Reiki and to make this practice as simple and accessible as possible through adequate demonstration and practice time in class.

The Five Reiki Ideals

The Five Reiki Ideals are a powerful tool that we can offer to people with cancer. They are compatible with the concept of “mindfulness,” which is defined as bringing one’s complete attention to the present moment. Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a program that is commonly taught in many cancer centers. Research has shown that MBSR can be helpful in reducing stress, anxiety and depression in people diagnosed with cancer (Foley, 2010; Smith, 2005).


The Reiki Ideals can be complementary to mindfulness training. They begin with the phrase “just for today,” which brings us immediately into the present moment. They continue with their gentle guidance for daily living—being grateful, releasing worry and anger, working diligently and showing love and compassion to self and others. The Reiki Ideals bring us to that place of feeling centered and calm, which is helpful to people coping with cancer.

In my own practice, I often find these clients to be distressed, anxious and fearful. They project their thoughts into the future, worrying about the potential course of their illnesses and how it will affect them and their loved ones. Sometimes they go back to the past, agonizing over lifestyle choices and experiences that may have contributed to their cancer diagnosis. In these instances, I teach my clients about the Reiki Ideals and how they can be used to release unhealthy thoughts and feelings. I often give copies of the Ideals to these clients, and in my Reiki classes I dedicate time to explaining and discussing each one in depth. I encourage all my students to recite and reflect upon the Reiki Ideals every day.

Reiki Distant Healing

Distant healing is traditionally taught in Reiki Level II classes and when I first began to teach, I followed this practice. However, many of my Level I students began to ask if they could also send distant healing. After much thought, I trusted my intuition and decided...“why not?” I now teach very basic distant healing in my Level I classes while explaining that taking a Reiki Level II class will enhance this ability when they learn to use the distant healing symbol. I find that students enthusiastically embrace this concept. We discuss how distant Reiki is very similar to praying for others. In both instances we are sending loving thoughts, intentions and energy to family and friends. People with cancer often need considerable support and care while going through treatment. Sending distant Reiki is a way for them to give back to others. In class, I review the issue of permission in that we cannot use or send Reiki to “fix” other people. We also discuss how Reiki can be sent forward in time, e.g., to a doctor’s appointment, or backward in time to heal an issue or something hurtful from the past.

Conclusion

Reiki is a powerful self-care practice that can impact positively on the day-to-day lives of people dealing with cancer—whether they are newly diagnosed, a cancer survivor or receiving hospice care. Reiki is a multifaceted gift that offers relaxation, comfort, emotional support and symptom relief. As Reiki practitioners and teachers, we can offer our skills and expertise, extend our Reiki hands and make a difference for those people whose lives are affected by cancer. 

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