

Therapeutic Touch

by Sharon Fish

Key People: Dora Kunz, psychic healer; Dolores Krieger, Ph.D., RN.

Founding Date: Ancient religious roots. First seriously proposed for Western medicine, 1975.

Key Books: *Therapeutic Touch: How to Use Your Hands to Help or to Heal*, (Prentice Hall Press, 1979), *Living the Therapeutic Touch*, (Dodd, Mead and Company Inc., 1987), *Accepting Your Power to Heal: The Personal Practice of Therapeutic Touch*, (Bear & Company, 1993), *The Personal Aura*, 1991; *The Chakras and the Human Energy Fields*, (The Theosophical Publishing House, 1989).

INTRODUCTION

Therapeutic Touch (TT) is one of the most visible, popular and controversial nontraditional healing techniques practiced by nurses and taught in schools of nursing throughout the United States.

A prime reason for the appeal of Therapeutic Touch is that its promoters claim it to be a nearly universal panacea. Practitioners of Therapeutic Touch say they can relieve pain, reduce anxiety, accelerate the body's healing process, and even raise hemoglobin levels with the practice of Therapeutic Touch. It is also credited with promoting emotional and spiritual healing. Anecdotal and research-based articles abound in the nursing literature, and studies have been conducted using Therapeutic Touch as an intervention on patients in a wide variety of settings.

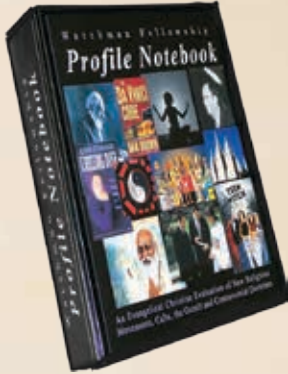
Therapeutic Touch is also heavily funded. In 1992, \$200,000 was granted to the D'Youville Nursing Center in Buffalo, New York, by the Division of Nursing, US Department of Health and Human Services, to treat patients and train students in the technique. In 1994, a Department of Defense grant of \$355,000 was given to a team of nurses at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, to study the effects of Therapeutic Touch on burn patients.

In the practice of Therapeutic Touch, no actual physical touch occurs. Therapeutic Touch is based on the assumption that the physical body is surrounded by an aura (energy not visible to normal vision) and is penetrated and kept alive by a universal energy called *prana* (a Sanskrit word meaning *vital force*) that flows through the body and is transformed by *chakras* or nonphysical vortices. Energy imbalance supposedly results in illness, which can be intuitively assessed in a form of psychic diagnosis, and then treated by means of the hands.¹

The technique of Therapeutic Touch usually consists of four steps. Initially the practitioner, commonly called a healer, is expected to enter a relaxed state of awareness known as *centering*. The practice of various meditative techniques - for example, the repetition of a mantra - are believed to help a person learn to center.

In the second stage of *assessment* the healer places his or her hands two to four inches away from the patient's body, palms down and open, then slowly hand-scans

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the entire body from head to toe in a synchronized fashion, intuitively searching for any imbalances in the person's energy field. Areas of pain and accumulated tension or inflammation are thought to manifest as sensations such as tingling, unusual pressure or pulsation, and temperature changes that can be perceived through the healer's hands.

Unruffling is the third step. The healer's hands now engage in circular sweeping motions designed to decongest accumulated energy, distributing any excess energy to areas of low flow or sometimes removing energy altogether by sweeping it down and out through the patient's feet. The healers will usually flick their wrists or shake their hands vigorously to rid themselves of any excess or negative energy.

The healer's hands will hover over certain parts of the body previously assessed as imbalanced in a step called *modulation*. Interpretations of this step vary. Some nurses view themselves as a channel of a universal healing energy that flows through them and out to their patients. Others believe they are somehow redirecting the patient's own energies. Still others talk about transferring their own subtle energies to the patient. A Therapeutic Touch intervention ends when the healer intuitively feels the patient's energies are back in balance.

HISTORY

Dolores Krieger, then professor of nursing at New York University, formally introduced Therapeutic Touch to the nursing community in the May 1975 issue of *The American Journal of Nursing*,² one of the most popular journals for practicing nurses. Krieger's own research measured hemoglobin levels in persons who received Therapeutic Touch.

She was influenced by Bernard Grad, a Canadian biochemist who taught at McGill University. Grad had conducted a variety of experiments, including one on the growth of barley seeds watered from flasks held by Oskar Estebany, a well-known shamanistic healer.³

Though Therapeutic Touch has been enthusiastically embraced by thousands, its research claims have been called into question because of flawed and uncontrolled studies and lack of empirical evidence supporting the existence of an energy field.⁴

In some states legal issues are being raised about a violation of patients' rights and issues of truth-in-advertising as Therapeutic Touch is generally presented to the patient as an intervention supported by the principles of quantum mechanics (physics) and relativity. Robert Park, a physicist and spokesman for the American Physical Society, the country's largest association of physicists, disagrees.

In *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Park was quoted as stating that Therapeutic Touch proponents who claimed that a human energy field could be explained by quantum mechanics and relativity had "no idea what science is all about . . . they invoke the symbols of science to justify themselves."⁵

DOCTRINE

Described by Krieger as a nontraditional healing technique with no *specific* religious context, Therapeutic Touch's religious roots are highly *syncretistic*. Therapeutic Touch can best be categorized as an occult healing practice that is conceptually grounded in an eclectic mix of non-Christian religions and philosophies.

Dolores Krieger is the person who has popularized Therapeutic Touch for nurses and the general public. Krieger's mentor was Dora van Gelder Kunz, a clairvoyant and

psychic healer. Krieger describes Kunz as a woman “born with a unique ability to perceive subtle energies around living beings.”⁶ Kunz writes that at birth she was completely enveloped in a caul (the fetal membrane) which she understood to signify second sight. She became aware of her clairvoyant abilities and began to develop them at the age of six or seven. Her tutor in the process was C. W. Leadbeater, a controversial leader in the Theosophical movement in India.⁷ Kunz was also past president of the Theosophical Society in America, Chairman of the Theosophical Publishing House, and Editor-in-Chief of *The American Theosophist*.

The primary training site for Therapeutic Touch intensive workshops is Pumpkin Hollow, a retreat center in Craryville, New York, owned and operated by the Theosophical Society of America. The roots of modern Theosophy can be traced to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian-born psychic whose writings have paved the way for Americans’ current fascination with the paranormal.

Theosophy is a syncretistic blending of ancient and occult religions and philosophies including (but not confined to) concepts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, the Egyptian Hermetic traditions, Neoplatonism, Kabbalism (Jewish mysticism), Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry and spiritualism. One major goal of The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, continues to be “the investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.”⁸

While Therapeutic Touch is most closely associated with Theosophical thought and various forms of eastern mysticism, it is also related to several other traditions that have their roots in occultism and esoterism.⁹

One program at the American Nurses’ Association’s annual convention in 1994 included a seminar entitled “Crones, Nurses and Witches.” The course was designed to explore the concept of energy fields and their relationship to Therapeutic Touch. Stewart Farrar’s book, *What Witches Do* and *Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft*¹⁰ contain descriptions of a Wiccan or neopagan healing ritual that are nearly identical to the Therapeutic Touch process described by Krieger; in Wiccan healing, the diagnosis is described as a clairvoyant art.

Therapeutic Touch has also been compared to mesmerism, a 19th century magnetic healing practice. Founder Anton Mesmer believed that a subtle fluid (*cf.* “subtle energies”) in the body needed to be controlled or expelled from the body in order for healing to occur. He believed the hands could be the vehicle for control or expulsion. Disciples of Mesmer soon incorporated trance mediumship into the technique, paving the way for the development of spiritualism.¹¹ In similar fashion, Therapeutic Touch has paved the way for various forms of mediumistic activity by spawning a number of evolutionary offshoots. Most notable is the practice of Healing Touch, an occult practice that teaches nurses how to contact spirit guides to aid in psychic diagnosis and treatment. Healing Touch workshop content often incorporates material channeled by “ascended Masters.”¹²

Krieger encourages students of Therapeutic Touch to tap into their unconscious by Jungian types of dream interpretation, the drawing and visualization of mandalas, and divination by means of consulting the *I Ching*.¹³

The development of latent telepathic abilities are expected byproducts of practicing Therapeutic Touch. Dowsing rods are also used in training to assess energy fields.¹⁴ Barbara Blattner, RN, who describes Therapeutic Touch as a form of psychic healing in a textbook for nursing students, wrote that “occult sciences” like astrology,

numerology, tarot, chiromy (palm reading) and graphology (handwriting analysis) could also be used by nurses to develop their intuitive assessment skills for use in psychic healing techniques like Therapeutic Touch.¹⁵

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

All forms of divination or occult assessment are strictly forbidden in the scriptures (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). Magical practices and divination are considered the work of Satan and his powers (Acts 8, 13, 16 and 19).

While Therapeutic Touch is often likened to the biblical tradition of the laying-on of hands, it is, in reality, much different. The underlying worldview of Therapeutic Touch is pantheistic in nature, characterized by the belief in energy as ultimate reality and an "essential unity among all beings."¹⁶

God as revealed in the scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ is not a vague impersonal energy force. God is highly personal and distinct from (yet intimately involved with) His creation. In the biblical understanding of divine healing, Christians are to lay hands - in a literal bodily sense - on the sick and pray for physical healing in Jesus' name. Spiritual and emotional healing can only occur in the context of a personal relationship with the living God, not through "rebalancing energy."

RECOMMENDED READING

Powers of Darkness by Clinton E. Arnold, InterVarsity Press, 1992 gives perspective on the current occult explosion through an examination of biblical teachings about magic, sorcery and divination. Bibliography, index, notes, paper, 244 pages.

The Death of Truth edited by Dennis McCallum. Excellent volume on the causes and impact of society's belief that truth can not be known. Includes a chapter on Therapeutic Touch and postmodernism by Donal O'Mathuna. Glossary, index, paper, 288 pages.

Testing the Spirits by Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, InterVarsity Press, 1995. Excellent chapters on alternative healing in the context of the new mysticism. End notes, paper, 240 pages.

Notes

¹ *The Personal Aura*, 32-55.

² 784-7.

³ *Spiritual Dimensions of Healing: from Native Shamanism to Contemporary Health Care*, 1992.

⁴ See "Our Naked Emperor" editorial in *Research in Nursing and Health*, 1995, Vol. 18, 1-2.

⁵ "Therapeutic Touch? Skeptics Here Bet Against It," January 21, 1997, A1, A6.

⁶ *Therapeutic Touch*, 4.

⁷ *The Personal Aura*, 5-6.

⁸ *HPB*, 1993, xviii.

⁹ See "Therapeutic Touch: Healing Science or Psychic Midwife?", *Christian Research Journal*, Summer, 1995, 28-38.

¹⁰ Published 1983 and 1990 respectively.

¹¹ *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, 1982.

¹² Healing Touch workshop brochures on file.

¹³ *Therapeutic Touch*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71, 119.

¹⁵ *Holistic Nursing*, 1981, 329, 331.

¹⁶ *Living the Therapeutic Touch*, 33.



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