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### **An exploratory study of Reiki experiences in women who have cancer**

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## An exploratory study of Reiki experiences in women who have cancer

### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** To explore the perceptions and experiences of Reiki for women who have cancer and identify outcome measures for an intervention study.

**Methods:** An exploratory, qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was conducted analysed by Framework Analysis.

A convenience sample of 10 women in follow up after cancer treatment were interviewed.

**Results:** The findings reflect four timescales: Views and understanding of Reiki prior to receiving Reiki, Experiences during Reiki, Experiences after Reiki, and Views of Reiki after having Reiki. Participants described the movement of energy with associated feelings of emotional release, feelings of inner peace, relaxation and hope, and a sense of being cared for, reduced pain relief, improved sleep, a sense of calm and peace, reduced depression and improved self-confidence. Some benefits were reported to last up to a week.

**Conclusion:** This work adds to the evidence of the multiple perceived benefits of Reiki.

**Aims:** To explore the perceptions and experiences of Reiki for women who have cancer and identify outcome measures for an intervention study.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional qualitative study of 10 women who had received Reiki after cancer treatment was conducted. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and coded using Framework Analysis.

**Results:** Key themes identified were:

- limited understanding of Reiki prior to receiving any Reiki

- release of emotional strain during Reiki - feelings of a release of energy, a clearing of the mind from cancer, inner peace/relaxation, hope, a sense of being cared for
- experience of physical sensations during Reiki, such as pain relief and tingling
- physical, emotional and cognitive improvements after Reiki, such as improved sleep, a sense of calm and peace, reduced depression and improved self-confidence

**Conclusion:** Findings suggest that Reiki could be a beneficial tool in the self-management of quality of life issues for women with cancer.

**Key terms:** Reiki, neoplasm, complementary therapy, cancer care, palliative care, wellbeing

## Introduction

Worldwide cancer survival rates are increasing. In 2012 there were 32.6 million people living with cancer within five years of diagnosis (GLOBOCAN, 2015). More people are now living with or after cancer than at any other period in history, and management of long-term medical and psychosocial health is crucial. The physical, emotional, psychological and social needs of women as 'cancer survivors' are well represented throughout the multidisciplinary literature (Bradley et al., 2006; Corner, 2008; Foster & Fenlon, 2011) problems of self-esteem, loss of functional role, fatigue, pain and depression are well documented (Olesen et al., 2015; Simard et al., 2013; Kirshbaum, 2010).

An estimated 33%–47% of individuals diagnosed with cancer use complementary therapies during cancer treatment (Horneber et al., 2012) either to manage symptoms or to promote and maintain their health and wellbeing as a self-management and self-help tool, promoting patient empowerment and choice. There is also a move to integrate complementary therapy provision into conventional cancer treatment centers (Stead et al., 2007; Prince of Wales Foundation 2003; Mackereth, 2004). However, despite the increasing demand for complementary therapies in cancer care, high quality evidence for their use remains lacking. A recent systematic review of randomised trials in breast cancer showed strong evidence for the use of meditation and yoga for mood improvement and moderate evidence for massage in stress management (Greenlee et al., 2014), but found that evidence for most other complementary therapies was weak. Another review of complementary therapies use for cancer pain also concluded that complementary therapies may be beneficial for alleviating cancer pain, but the evidence levels were found to be low or moderate (Bao et al., 2014).

Reiki, an energy-based natural therapy, is a popular complementary therapy that seeks to harmonize the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual domains of a person's wellbeing and has a positive impact by alleviating anxiety, stress and perception of pain. Few robust studies have been carried out on Reiki. Although there is some evidence of a benefit during chemotherapy (Post-White et al.,

2003; Catlin & Taylor-Ford, 2011), little research has been carried in the supportive, palliative care setting. Therapeutic Touch is another natural therapy that utilises the human energy field to balance energy flows and facilitate the healing process. Therapeutic Touch is similar to Reiki, with the key differences being the philosophic basis of the therapies and the training procedures (Potter, 2003).

Qualitative studies of Reiki and Therapeutic Touch in other disease areas have highlighted concepts such as sense of awareness, feeling cared for, security, feelings of comfort, and feeling connected to self and universal energy (Roberts et al., 2005; Hayes & Cox, 1999; Kiernan, 2002; Kelly et al., 2004), concepts that have not generally been measured in the Reiki studies carried out to date in cancer.

We aimed to conduct initial qualitative exploratory research to further understand the perceptions and experiences of Reiki in women with cancer and identify appropriate outcomes for a larger scale intervention study of the effects of Reiki on quality of life issues.

## Methods

An exploratory, qualitative research design was used to encourage women to talk about their experiences with Reiki and to capture their perceptions in their own words. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research and ethics committees at the local university and local hospices.

The study aimed to recruit 10 women. A convenience sample of 10 participants was selected from the population of women who had received Reiki therapy at a holistic health spa or local hospice who satisfied the eligibility criteria. Eligible women were those who had received cancer treatment and were in a period of follow-up (not on active chemotherapy or radiotherapy). As the sample size was limited, we chose to only include participants who had received at least two sessions of Reiki therapy since their diagnosis of cancer so that they had a broad range of experiences to discuss.

Potential participants were approached by a Reiki therapist at the participating centres. The study and its purpose were mentioned briefly and the woman was given an information sheet to read. If

interested, the woman was contacted by a member of the research team to discuss participation in the study and to arrange an interview date. Formal written, informed consent was obtained following an opportunity to ask questions and confirmation of eligibility.

Interviews were conducted between November 2013 and June 2014. A demographic questionnaire captured individual details pertaining to age, cancer type and time since diagnosis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the spa, hospice or in the participant's home, according to individual preferences. An interview guide was developed to structure the interviews. Participants were interviewed once and asked: why they had chosen to have Reiki; about their beliefs and expectations of Reiki prior to receiving Reiki; what they felt or experienced during Reiki sessions; how they felt after the Reiki session and the duration of any effects; their views of Reiki after receiving Reiki; and about any emotional, physical or social effects associated with their experiences of Reiki. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

Interview transcripts were analysed using Framework Analysis (Richie and Spencer 1994). A coding framework was developed based on the themes included in the interview guide. Participant data were then mapped onto the initial coding template and modified further until all relevant data were coded satisfactorily. Sub-themes were identified for each main theme. Anonymised verbatim extracts from the interview data are presented below to illustrate the main themes.

## Results

The mean age of participants was 63 years (range 31 to 84 years). The mean time since diagnosis was 6 years (range 5 months to 25 years). Participants had a range of cancer diagnoses (three lung, three breast, one endometrial, one sarcoma, one leukaemia, one bowel). On average, participants had received 5 sessions of Reiki ranging from 20-60 minute sessions; all had received at least two before being interviewed for the study. No participants had received Reiki prior to being diagnosed with cancer. The findings of the research are split into four timescales to enable an understanding of

the perceptions and experiences of Reiki before, during and after Reiki sessions ~~Views and understanding of Reiki prior to receiving Reiki, Experiences during Reiki, Experiences after Reiki, and Views of Reiki after having Reiki.~~ The analysis revealed a number of main themes and sub-themes within each of these timeframes.

### **Views and understanding of Reiki prior to Reiki treatments**

The majority of participants had limited knowledge of Reiki prior to receiving any Reiki. Participants generally agreed to have Reiki because it had been recommended by a friend or the hospice/spa staff, often because other complementary therapies were contraindicated.

There was also a degree of scepticism about the therapy and a lack of expectation of any benefit with participants struggling to see how a therapy such as Reiki could actually have any effect:

*“We live in a world where unless you can, you know, measure it or see it, people don’t seem to put so much precedence on feeling something. You think oh I’m not sure about the fact that I’m just going to lie there and they’re not just going to even touch me and is that going to actually benefit me”*

*[Participant 2]*

Despite this general lack of knowledge mixed with scepticism, some participants had high hopes of Reiki benefiting them:

*“I was waiting for a miracle” [Participant 8]*

### **Experiences during Reiki**

Despite the limited knowledge and lack of expectations about Reiki, participants reported some interesting experiences during their Reiki relating to a release of emotional strain and the experience of physical sensations and feelings. The release of emotional strain was a key theme for these women living with cancer.

Participants described feelings relating to a release of energy during Reiki, a clearing of their mind from the cancer, inner peace and relaxation, and a feeling of being cared for.

### ***Release of emotional strain***

It was interesting to observe that although most participants had a limited understanding of Reiki prior to receiving any Reiki, many of them described feelings such as energy movement, energy release and the replacement of negative energy with positive energy – all related to the modes of action of Reiki. These were unprompted, genuine feelings and experiences:

*“She had her hands on my belly where my tumour is and it just felt like, like a waterfall, like right down into the bed. It was really strange. It wasn’t cold, it was like whoosh. It was going through me, it was really strange. It just went away as soon as she took her hands off my tummy” [Participant 1]*

*“I actually could feel my energy, suddenly this light lit up and I could feel my energy going through my body. I suddenly felt this real kind of tightness in my chest and then I just started to cry, it’s almost like it was all this energy was trapped and it was just coming out and it had been suddenly allowed to release and it was just, and you could see this light, this sort of almost strong light in my head and in my feet and all over my body” [Participant 2]*

*“You just start relaxing and well it, you just seem as though everything sort of drains out of you and just somehow laid there heavy, but it’s a nice sensation” [Participant 3]*

*“I had quite an experience. I just felt as if I was being shot through a hole, there was this big hole and it was as if I was in a cannon and all of a sudden somebody shot me out through this hole and I was just travelling” [Participant 4]*

The Reiki session also provided an escape from the realities of having cancer:



*“It just helps you maybe just focus on something else for a while rather than cancer being at the front of your mind. I very rarely think about cancer when I’m having Reiki. That sounds silly because I’m having Reiki because I’ve got cancer. But during it, I never really think about cancer. It clears your mind, gives emotional space” [Participant 1]*

*“Everything starts, seems to start disappearing in your mind” [Participant 3]*

*“You forget your problems, you forget that you’re poorly, you forget that you’ve this terrible thing called cancer. I think the main that I’ve experienced is just sheer relaxation and peace and free from pain at that particular time. It’s as if, as if that’s gone somewhere else for that hour that you’re having it, that you’re just there and everything’s at peace and you’re relaxed and therefore everything’s just gone for that hour and its very very good. You learn to forget things, you know” [Participant 4]*

*“When I had the chemotherapy, erm, I did feel anxious and I think when you’re having the Reiki, it stops you feeling anxious because you’re sort of concentrating on the Reiki and you feel better. I think it helps put you on an even keel, because if you went in and you were very anxious, the atmosphere and the actual, it would take your mind off it” [Participant 6]*

*“Where your head is full, well my head, is full of nonsense, for that half hour, its empty. Erm, I’m not thinking about cancer or what I’m going to do when I get home or, it’s just so peaceful, it’s unbelievable. Doing this half hour session is, well it takes everything away, you know, everything I don’t want to think about has gone, I’m just concentrating on the music and it’s brilliant” [Participant 9]*

As well as freeing people’s thoughts from cancer, the Reiki also created a feeling of inner peace and relaxation:

*“Within seconds their hands, you can feel the heat and the power in their hands and err, then you just gradually, you can feel yourself sinking further and further into this cavern. It’s complete relaxation and to feel cocooned and loved and a feeling of peace, that’s how I would explain it, because it is a feeling of peace, complete peace” [Participant 4]*

*“I felt more relaxed, I felt I didn’t want to get off the table, you know, because I was beginning to feel like I think I should have been feeling and relaxed and that tingling and I could feel she was getting somewhere in my body, you know” [Participant 8]*

Some participants also described a feeling of being cared for and looked after in a non-medical manner:

*“I think you feel quite pampered and special, you know, and its, its really nice. I think it makes you feel special because there’s someone sort of looking after you and you don’t get a lot of that nowadays, do you. Everything’s rush rush rush and when you get in, they never seem to sort of rush you, so that, that feels good, yeah” [Participant 6]*

### **Physical sensations and feelings**

During the Reiki sessions, participants noticed a range of physical sensations and feelings including seeing colours, pain relief, warmth, tingling and a feeling of wellness:

*“I definitely get pain relief” [Participant 1]*

*“Sometimes I might see some colours, like nice soothing colours, nice purple or yellow” [Participant 6]*

*“You can sort of often feel heat coming, even though she’s not actually touching you, you know, the heat of the hands you can feel, so that sort of feels soothing” [Participant 6]*

*“I just felt this tingling, although she wasn’t touching me, I could actually feel, you know, the tingling as her hands were going all down, you know, your body, right to your toes” [Participant 8]*

## **Experiences after Reiki**

As well as the experiences during the Reiki sessions, participants described many benefits and feelings after the Reiki, including physical effects, emotional benefits and cognitive improvements. Some of the effects were felt on the day following the Reiki, others lasted up to a week after the Reiki session.

### ***Physical effects***

After the Reiki session, participants reported improvements with sleep, pain, energy levels and symptoms:

*“My sleep’s not great at the best of times and it’s quite nice because I do usually sleep [after Reiki]”  
[Participant 1]*

*“All the times it helped for maybe not a whole week, maybe like four or five days, that sort of period. When I was struggling with my back, I felt more comfortable for at least a week afterwards, definitely. It’s definitely had a positive impact with pain” [Participant 1]*

*“I felt my energy levels were flagging a bit. But then as soon as I’ve had my Reiki, I’ve been quite energised again. It’s almost like I thought I need to have my Reiki for energy and that’s probably what I feel like after having my other Reiki’s, that I’ve got this energy, it’s almost like it sort of lifts me” [Participant 2]*

*“Yeah, I don’t think I felt the coughing so much. It takes that breathlessness away” [Participant 8]*

### ***Emotional effects***

After having Reiki, participants reported feeling an emotional release, feelings of calm, relaxation and peace, and relieved depression.

*"It {the cancer} is like standing on a precipice and the Reiki definitely helps with that feeling. I think it just pulls you back from the cliff a little bit" [Participant 1]*

*"[After] my first one, I probably just felt very, just a release really. Somehow after that the past didn't seem to matter so much. It's almost like I'd felt this release and I felt a lot calmer. I felt lightened up and quite released" [Participant 2]*

*"I feel very deep relaxation on the day actually, after I've had my Reiki. I think it's just made me a lot more calmer and just very accepting of things and very grateful for what I have and given me a lot more clarity" [Participant 2]*

*"It got me out of the deep blackness I were in, the depression I were in, I were really depressed, really. I feel as though I've come out of something, you know, away from something that were holding me back, now it's not" [Participant 3]*

*"I feel very laid back, a bit like when, you know, when you've meditated and you don't really want to, want to, you know, when she says, you know, you can get off the bed now, and you think hmm I don't want to, but obviously you do, you know. So yeah, you feel nice and soothed" [Participant 6]*

*"I think I got into it more and more and I just felt more relaxed as it was over. I think it stays with you, you feel more relaxed, you feel a change in your body. I felt so tense before and it's like a releasing a depressed feeling, you know, it makes you feel happier that you're letting someone do something for you that can, you'll benefit from" [Participant 8]*

### **Cognitive effects**

The Reiki also seemed to help participants with their everyday life, giving hope and improving their self-confidence and ability to cope with life.

*“Ready to tackle the world again, just relaxing, taking a step back and then being able to get back at it. I think there’s definitely something in being able to give emotionally at work by being more calm in myself” [Participant 1]*

*“I feel the Reiki’s really helped and especially that first two sessions, the unblocking, I don’t seem to be residing in the past anymore. It’s almost like I can see a future now and I’m always really excited about it and I think the Reiki’s really helped with that” [Participant 2]*

*“There’s always hope, as long as there’s life there, there’s hope and there’s new things coming out all the time and Reiki just puts you in that position to find the peace to cope with all this and the wellbeing” [Participant 4]*

*“Just wanting to see your garden looking nice because you feel better in yourself and taking my grandchildren out and treating them to toys” [Participant 8]*

### **Views and understanding of Reiki after having Reiki**

The views of participants after experiencing Reiki were strikingly different and more positive than their views and understanding prior to having Reiki. Many participants were impressed and even amazed by the actual experience and were looking forward to having more Reiki. The Reiki was helped some participants cope with the cancer treatment and regain normality in their lives. Some compared the experience of Reiki to a still meditation. Some were now able to understand how Reiki worked, having experienced the feelings of the energy flow.

*“It probably exceeded my low expectation of not really knowing what to expect, in that I definitely felt better. I’ve had acupuncture and reflexology, I probably like Reiki the best. [with] acupuncture and reflexology, again there’s that element of lying in a darkened room and having an hour to yourself away from the world. So there’s that element. But I don’t tend to get as trance like with them, I don’t know why, but I just don’t seem to be able to go into that state” [Participant 1]*

*“It’s almost like I can’t wait for the next one, like I’m counting the days until I have my next session and the excitement of it all and you think yes, I can get through the next cycle because I’ve got my Reiki at the end of it, you know and it is a sense of looking forward to it and a sense of you know it’s something that obviously your body feels will help” [Participant 2]*

*“This is me, this is what I would like, this is how I want to feel and I think obviously the more you have it, and more its instilled in you how to relax, and err, how to help your body, how to help yourself” [Participant 4]*

*“It brings all my good energies to the surface, I’d like to think that it’s battling the negative, err, energies that I’ve got and I’m hoping they’re less and less each time that I have Reiki. I feel that **that** my good energy is overriding the negative energy” [Participant 5]*

*“I just can’t believe that can make such a big difference, it’s really, err, it’s really something. And that was it, you know, I was hooked on it” [Participant 9]*

*“It’s a stillness. I think you have to let your body and your mind go still, as much as you can. Almost like a meditation” [Participant 10]*

## Discussion

In the middle of a life-changing experience, full of medical attention, tests, hospital visits, sometimes aggressive treatment, anxiety, fear and clinical care, Reiki appears to offer people an escape from the strains and stresses of living with cancer. Despite a lack of knowledge and awareness of Reiki, the participants in the study described body sensations relating to a movement of energy with associated feelings of emotional release. They also described feelings of inner peace and relaxation, and a sense of being cared for. It was reported that Reiki allowed participants to clear their minds of cancer and to forget about the anxiety and stresses relating to their cancer.

The Reiki was also associated with perceived physical benefits including pain relief, improved sleep, reduced symptoms and increased energy levels, as well as emotional benefits such as improved feelings of wellness, a sense of calm and peace, reduced depression. Cognitive benefits were also described, such as a sense of hope and improved self-confidence.

Participants attributed better sleep, improved energy levels and the ability to relax to Reiki. Women reported a cumulative effect, with the ability to relax quicker each time they had a Reiki session. Benefits were noted during and after the Reiki, lasting up to a week in some cases. Participants also reported the ability to relax at home by thinking about Reiki - some participants told us that they played music at home to help bring back the feeling of when they were having Reiki.

The psychological impact of Reiki and the emotional benefits of this non-invasive holistic therapy seen in our study are striking and appeared to complement conventional cancer treatment. It seems as though having Reiki helped these women maintain their quality of life and not just focus on fear and negative thoughts.

Our findings correlate with other studies and systematic reviews that demonstrated benefits of Reiki including increased well-being (Catlin & Taylor-Ford, 2011), reduced fatigue and mood disturbance (Post-White et al., 2003) and lowered pain and anxiety (Thrane & Cohen, 2014). Other studies have shown that people having Reiki partly do so to take control and to promote self-management and self-healing (Kelly et al., 2004). Self-healing was not an issue that arose in our research. We believe this is because most of the participants did not understand that Reiki, through its energy flows, can have a healing effect and so it was not something that our participants had actually considered.

The main limitation of this was its small size and exploratory research methodology that did not involve quality of life measurement tools. Previous Reiki research has used quality of life tools that measure general symptoms and psychosocial issues such as changes in 'mood' or 'anxiety' (Egan et al., 2012). However, the authors of the current study took a different approach; they were

interested in doing the exploratory work first, to identify the areas of perceived benefit to inform the selection of measurement instruments in subsequent studies. In addition to the traditional domains of quality of life instruments this study proposes that new effects such as 'release of emotional strain' or body sensations such as 'energy release' be considered for quantifiable reporting. Future Reiki research should choose assessment methods that allow these issues to be measured and described in more detail as they are specific to energy therapies such as Reiki and would allow a more robust evaluation of its effects within the context of a qualitative intervention study. This is supported by Adgal et al. (2011), who concluded that the psychosocial processes shown to be of importance and significance to participants in studies of energy healing need to be explored further. They state that rather than dismissing such outcomes as placebo effects, they should be taken into account and explored to extend the scope of clinical trials. Further research using carefully selected validated quality of life measurement tools along with the essential development of reliable instruments to capture sensations such as 'energy release' and 'release of emotional strain' will be the next step forward in our investigations.

Although these women were diagnosed with different cancers, there did not seem to be a noticeable difference between them. However, larger sample within an experimental design, it may be that significant differences in effect could be captured. As the demand for complementary therapies continues to increase, there is a growing need for wider evidence-based investigations to demonstrate the efficacy of Reiki as a self-management strategy for wellbeing in cancer. **Specific outcome measures that capture data on quality of life, person satisfaction and stress reduction along with reporting details of patient experience would provide necessary empirical evidence. There is also a need to explore the psychological and emotional impact of Reiki in men with cancer.** This work adds to the evidence in an area that is under-researched, but larger, more robust studies are required. We intend to continue to deepen our understanding and provide measurable, empirical evidence that supports the personal accounts of the beneficial experience of Reiki reported in this foundational original study.





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