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Reiki for Mental Health

BY ALLISON BATTY-CAPPS

THOSE OF US WHO PRACTICE REIKI have experienced its benefits first-hand. However, many of us may not know of the scientific evidence that validates the value Reiki provides. As a marriage and family therapist, and a Reiki Master, I have made it a priority to understand the scientific research behind various approaches to healing so I can more clearly explain them to my clients. Because of this, I have been approached by my colleagues in the mental health field and asked to share how I explain Reiki to my clients. As this has come up frequently, I thought this information might be valuable to Reiki practitioners. So, here is a basic break down of the research on the benefits of Reiki for mental health issues from a neuroscience perspective. This information is essential as it helps us understand how Reiki changes the body and brain.

A number of scientific studies reveal that the vagus nerve plays a vital role in mediating the mutual interactions between the brain and the body. Research also shows that the vagus nerve helps regulate the health of the body, including inflammatory responses, glucose regulation, and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal function.¹ The location of the vagus nerve is below the lungs in the abdomen, so when we take deep, relaxed breaths, we stimulate the vagus nerve. This fact is important to understand because, under stress, we are more likely to take shallow breaths which leads to increased heart rate because the vagus nerve is *unstimulated*. When our heart rate increases, it activates the autonomic nervous system, sending us into a state of distress. You have probably heard of the fight, flight, or freeze response which the auto-

onomic nervous system activates when triggered. If triggered often enough it can affect the health of the body and mind.

Science further reveals that the autonomic nervous system is responsible for emotional expression and social behavior. This point is essential to understand because a compromised autonomic nervous system, as characterized by reduced heart rate variability, is associated with cognitive and affective dysregulation, and psychological inflexibility, which are major psychological risk factors for chronic pain, chronic anxiety, and depression.² Under stress, our body struggles to regulate itself, and when triggered often enough can lead to mental health issues and chronic pain as we begin to believe that the world is a dangerous place.

You might wonder what this information has to do with Reiki? Well, if a compromised autonomic nervous system and vagus nerve lead to physical and emotional distress, then relaxing these systems would lead to better regulation of emotional responses, development of healthy coping strategies, increased positive emotions, and social connectedness. Scientific studies support this observation showing that “artificial stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system via the vagus nerve has been shown to reduce the perception of pain, reduce depression and improve mood and quality of life.”³ During Reiki, the client experiences a meditative state of calm where breath slows and deepens, stimulating the vagus nerve, which in turn slows their heart rate, activating the parasympathetic nervous system and deactivating the autonomic nervous system. So, Reiki assists the body in regulating itself.

You might think, well, it makes sense that during Reiki, the individual’s body can be in a relaxed state, but how does this benefit them long-term and heal their body and brain? We can define stress as wanting or expecting the situations we encounter to differ from how we perceive them to be. Neuroscience has shown that 90% of our brain scans our environment, looking for data that validates our belief systems. So, if we believe the world is dangerous and overwhelming, our brain will perceive information that confirms our belief

system, tuning out any data that devalues our belief system. So, we see the world in a way that leads to further stress.

Mindfulness is the practice of increasing conscious awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions and actions. Current research in neuroscience shows that when individuals practice mindfulness, the neural pathways in the brain begin to reconnect. Being mindful can assist our brain in changing our belief systems leading to enhanced attention control, improved emotion regulation, and altered self-awareness. As Reiki takes the individual into a state of mindfulness, it is helping the neural pathways in the brain form new connections so that the client’s belief systems begin to change, and they perceive the world more positively. The more an individual practices a state of mindfulness, the faster their belief systems will change. So, we should practice Reiki daily because Reiki revamps our brain to perceive more joy, more connection to self-compassion and love, and a sense of peace.

I hope that this information helps you to understand better how the body and mind work from a scientific approach and how Reiki leads to long-term healing of the body, mind and spirit. ❀



Allison is a marriage and family therapist and Reiki Master Practitioner. She received her Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, specializing in Marriage and Family Therapy, from Pacifica Graduate Institute, and her Usui/Holy Fire® III Reiki Master certification with The International Center for Reiki Training. You may contact Allison by email at allison@blossomingheartcounseling.com, through her website at www.battycappscounseling.com or by phone at (971) 249-2157.

Endnotes

- ¹ McManus, David E. “Reiki Is Better Than Placebo and Has Broad Potential as a Complementary Health Therapy.” *Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine* 22, no. 4 (October 2017): 1051–57. doi:10.1177/2156587217728644.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.