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# Better than fine

Imagine if, even in tough times, energy medicine could help you feel better than you ever had. Here, we test a promise that science can't explain—but experience can't deny.

BY Siobhan O'Connor

**H**ow long after your brother dies do you stop breaking things? I'm quick in the kitchen, an impulsive, dinner-in-20 kind of cook, but I'm not clumsy. Not, generally speaking, a breaker of things. Yet I'd reached the six-wineglass mark when I wrote that line in my journal. Never mind that I was accidentally shattering family heirlooms or sweeping up shards of glass every other night. I knew, in the parlance of New Age types and, fine, me, that I was a little "out of balance." Not "in my body." More plainly: I was a bit of a mess.

It had been a month since my older brother, Denis, passed away at the age of 34—12 years since his metastatic cancer diagnosis and 3 years since my sister-in-law had given birth to their identical twin daughters. About 6 weeks earlier, his text messages had started buzzing in at strange hours. They were touching: "Love you, sis." And puzzling: "Can you get me some new dress shirts at J.Crew?" I'd planned to deliver them to him in Toronto on a Friday. That same Friday, just after 2 in the morning, he took his last breath.

Question 1: What to do with the shirts? Question 2: How, when you've lost your favorite person on the planet, do you not become a total basket case? The paradox of a long good-bye is that it forces you to appreciate every moment as it happens, even while you're half holding your breath, terrified of what you know is coming. How to do that without going to pieces (or weaving yourself into a bulletproof cocoon) takes work. But thanks to the nebulous but compelling field of energy healing, the basket-case question proved the easier one for me to answer. It was time for another session with Paul.

**E**nergy healing is a branch of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), one of five categories acknowledged by the National Institutes of Health as having potential, if not scientifically proven, therapeutic qualities. It's commonly thought of as a way to deal with health problems that conventional medicine can't seem to fix, but as any practitioner will tell you, it can help you sort through your emotional muck too.



Energy healing includes a wide variety of seemingly disconnected therapies, including Reiki and chakra tuning, as well as some from other branches of CAM, such as meditation, acupuncture, and acupressure. Each of its applications maintains that there's more to you than your physical body and your mind—there's a third guy at the table, and he holds the cards when it comes to achieving and, better, maintaining the kind of balance that no amount of talk therapy and green juices alone can.

That third guy—your life force, or qi—is ultrasensitive, registering everything that happens to you, big and small. “Your energy body is no different from a CD-ROM,” says Abdi Assadi, a licensed acupuncturist and spiritual counselor in New York City. Someone you love gets sick. That lightbulb in the closet burns out. You meet the love of your life. A jerk on the subway bumps into you. Your energy body logs all of it—as well as the feelings it triggers—and over time, those unexpressed and often unconscious emotions can cause your energy to get stuck. When this happens, the theory goes, you don't feel your best. Energy healing can help with that. Because no matter how rotten the external circumstances, when your energy is flowing as it should, you can feel better. That's a hell of a promise. It's what got me hooked, anyway.

**I**t was March 2011, and I'd popped a rib at yoga. My daily Advil intake was reaching unhealthy highs when I found a photocopy of a business card on my desk. *Huh*, I thought. *Where'd that come from?* The card bore the name Paul Kemawikosit, LAc. He was an acupuncturist, and his office wasn't too far from mine in Manhattan. As an editor at a health magazine, I knew a fair

amount about the ancient Chinese practice. Energy healing, I knew, had been practiced in its many forms for millennia, and today, more than a third of Americans turn to CAM as a noninvasive way to address everything from high blood pressure to depression.

Like many people, I decided to try acupuncture when Western medicine couldn't help me. My doctor had told me I'd have to wait out the stabbing rib pain, and I was desperate. Also, Denis had taken some turns for the worse recently. To keep it together, I was on a steady don't-go-to-pieces plan that involved my wonderful therapist, healthy eating, attempts to meditate, too much yoga, and even more work. It seemed to be helping. I felt sad sometimes, and there had been days (OK, years) when I went to bed with my phone on my pillow, worried that I might sleep through a

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message from Denis that could be his last. But I was so *not* a basket case. Hadn't broken down in years. My ribs, however, killed. I sent Paul a note, and he replied within the hour. He could see me that same day.

Paul looked nothing like I'd expected. He wasn't wearing baggy yoga pants, Crocs, or prayer beads, and the place didn't smell like incense. He was built like a welterweight wrestler and had a baby face; he looked mid-30s, tops. He began our first session with a series of simple questions about my general health (good) and my sleep (bad). Then he asked why I was there. “I tore the connective tissue between two of my ribs,”

## Energy Therapies, Decoded

**ACUPUNCTURE** This centuries-old form of Chinese medicine involves the painless insertion of needles along points of the body called meridians, to release energy blockages. In the United States, it's most often used to relieve pain.

**CHAKRA TUNING** Indian healers believe that each of us has seven energy centers, called chakras, that receive, absorb, and express our energy, acting like a bridge between body and mind. Practitioners often use tuning forks to restore the energy flow.

**REIKI** This Japanese technique involves the ancient (and biblical) form of spiritual healing known as laying on of hands, in which the healer's hands transfer universal energy to yours to help you restore yourself to health.

I said. “Also, I’m not sure if this is relevant, but my brother is dying.” With practice, I’d gotten really good at delivering that bit of information without so much as a flicker of emotion, but this time my throat tightened. He took a look at my tongue and felt the pulse in my wrists, both common diagnostic tools in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

## *“Your energy body—or qi—registers everything that happens to you, big and small.”*

“Siobhan.” Oh dear. It’s never good when someone starts a sentence with your name. “I know you want to help your brother, but you have to take care of you.” I was confused. And a little miffed. *I do take care of myself*, I thought. *And what about my ribs, anyway?*

“Your qi is really depleted.” (I’ve since learned that’s acupuncture-speak for “Something else is going on here, whether you want to get into it or not.”) According to TCM, qi travels through 12 major meridians in your energy body. Any number of things, from repressed emotions to untreated disease, can result in its depletion. By poking certain points with hair-width needles, it’s believed, a healer can unblock areas where your qi has gotten stuck, resulting in better energy flow—and a better-feeling you. “I can only help you with you,” said Paul. My throat tightened again.

Minutes later, I was facedown on a table. Paul cued up some chanting monks and felt around my back, looking for tension. He reported that the area over my lungs, which TCM associates with grief, was a brick. After 20 minutes of bodywork, Paul tapped two dozen tiny needles into me and left the room.

I felt strange. Was I itchy? Maybe a little itchy. Maybe I needed to readjust my head in the cradle or shift my ribs? No. Neck was fine; ribs were as good as they were going to get.

I took a few deep breaths, my stomach filling up with air, pressing into the table, rebounding gently. I pictured Denis’s face as I’d done a million times before, imagined him at home in Toronto with his beautiful wife, Christina, and his little girls. Normally, that made me smile. This time, though, I started shaking. My stomach began pulsing and my chest heaving, jerking my face into the tissue-paper-covered cradle. Within seconds, the paper was soaked. I was crying for the first time in years. All the grief I was holding back broke through with such strength, I don’t know how I’d ever contained it.

When I left Paul’s office that night, nothing had actually changed. My brother was still going to die. There would still be deadlines at the office and thunderstorms on nights when I’d forgotten my umbrella. And my ribs still hurt. But somehow, I felt better. The feeling lasted weeks.

**I** *f I keep this up, I thought, maybe I’ll be fine no matter what.* “No matter what” meant “when Denis dies,” and since that could happen at any moment and I wanted to make the most of the time we still had together, I didn’t want my anticipatory grief to color everything. So I vowed to go back to Paul for monthly sessions. I called it maintenance, and over time, the benefits seemed to build upon themselves and multiply: My therapy sessions were more productive (and tearful), yet I also felt lighter and more joyful. But I still didn’t understand why I was feeling better, and I wanted to. I write about health and science for a living, and I wanted to know what had happened—what happens to anyone who



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gets acupuncture, gets their chakras tuned, or goes for a Reiki treatment.

All the researchers and practitioners I spoke with seem to agree that the energy in your body is far more sensitive than your conscious mind, recording, as Assadi had told me, every feeling and thought you have in a given day.

“Anything that happens to you affects your energetic system,” says James L. Oschman, PhD, the author of *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis*. “And trauma, especially, changes that energy.” I suppose all those e-mails and calls about Denis being in the hospital again might count as traumatic. How many of those had there been? A dozen? More?

Still, how our experiences get imprinted on us energetically is a mystery. Assadi offers this: “A thousand years ago, a lion jumps out and your breathing gets shallow, your muscles get tight, it’s fight or flight. Now, there are no lions, but your thoughts and your feelings trigger the same stress response.”

In other words, whether or not we realize it, every day—many times every day—we

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kind of panic. Maybe it’s a cranky exchange with a colleague, an argument with a lover, or getting cut off in traffic; those experiences engage that fight-or-flight response. When stress is cumulative, that survival mechanism can become overburdened. Weeks, months, and years of wear and tear cause damage, and suddenly the system that’s supposed to

save you turns against you. Your immune system sputters, and stress hormones such as cortisol deposit fat around your waist, upping your risks of heart disease, diabetes, and depression, even cancer.

That’s the scientific explanation of what energy healers would call a disruption of your energetic flow. They believe that by restoring that flow, energy healing may undo some of the damage of being stressed out—and, go figure, that feels pretty good.

**A**s the first anniversary of Denis’s death approached a couple of months ago, I ran all this by Paul. “The fact is, we don’t yet have the scientific measures to explain what’s happening,” he told me. “You simply can’t quantify the benefit. Do you feel better than you did? I think you do. But do you?” I do.

He continued: “The essence of energy healing is what one of my teachers calls nourishing life.” I’m not sure what he means, but I like it. When you love someone who’s sick, you learn that the sages are right and the clichés are true: Life is impermanent, death is certain, and sickness is part of the cycle for all of us. And nourishing life while you can, that’s part of the puzzle too.

Most people don’t get 12 years to say good-bye to their big brother. I’m not sure the time makes it any easier, but my monthly sessions with Paul did. Now I take comfort in knowing that no matter what’s going on, whether I’m falling in love or shattering heirlooms again or both, I can sit there with my wrists ready and my tongue out, and I’ll leave 2 hours later feeling better than fine.

And as for Denis’s J.Crew shirts, I decided to chuck them. It turns out some things are easier to let go of than others.