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Hospital Volunteers Provide Reiki for Those in Need

BY KELLY MCGUIRE

AS I WALK to the volunteer office, preparing to offer Reiki at my local hospital, my surroundings seem at odds with my intention. How can the frantic energy, chaotic pace, and sensory overload possibly translate into a place of peace, calm, and healing? I take a deep breath, bring my hands together, and place my trust in the process. Reiki has never let me down.

How Reiki Happens in a Hospital

Yale New Haven Hospital (YNHH) in New Haven, Connecticut, offers a volunteer program, part of the “Oasis for Healing” initiative, which provides complementary, bedside energy

healing as supportive care during a patient’s stay.¹ No candles. No music. No treatment table. Just a hospital bed, medical equipment, and a person, or sometimes a whole family, moving through something difficult, painful, or uncertain. And somehow, Reiki fits in here beautifully.

A group of Reiki volunteers who have completed the official YNHH volunteer training provides patients with gentle, hands-on energy-healing techniques, offering 15-minute sessions several times per week.² Patients can request a Reiki session themselves, but most often they receive a referral. A chaplain, nurse, social worker, or other member of the care team recognizes

that a patient or family member might benefit from additional support and submits a request through the YNHH Volunteer Services Department.³

How We Conduct Reiki Sessions

On the surface, hospital Reiki sessions are nothing like those conducted at a Reiki center. Patients frequently experience overwhelming physical, mental, and emotional distress. Standard hand placements may not be possible because of surgery or injury. For some patients, even light touch may be too much; for others, gentle touch is most desperately needed. Whether adult or pediatric patients, family members, or staff,

each requires a different approach for their Reiki session. Each needs an experience that fits their current circumstances and energy level, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to Reiki within this clinical setting.

Before entering a patient's room, I always review any necessary precautions and check in with their nurse to ensure the timing is right for a session. I knock, enter the room, and might say: "Hi, I'm Kelly. I'm a Reiki volunteer. Would you like a few minutes of Reiki today?" Sometimes it's a resounding "yes" right away. Sometimes they look unsure. Sometimes they say, "What is Reiki?" and we start there.

I explain, "Reiki is an ancient relaxation and energy healing technique. When a person is at rest and relaxed, their body is better able to heal." I'll describe a typical session as starting with three collective breaths, a few minutes of guided meditation, and then the Reiki portion, taking about 15–20 minutes in total. I stress that if they need to move or would like to stop the session, they should just let me know. I'll then ask if they would prefer light touch or no touch, and assure them that Reiki will flow either way. I emphasize that there is nothing for them to do but breathe, relax, and receive. Lastly, I will check if they have any questions before we begin.

With their approval, I will make the room as peaceful as possible. Dim the lights, put on some relaxing music. If appropriate, I'll put a sign on the door indicating a Reiki session is in progress to limit interruptions. The room will not be completely quiet. Machines keep beeping. Staff may have to come in and out of the room.

Announcements happen overhead. But Reiki works anyway. Breathing slows. Shoulders soften. A jaw unclenches. Often, a patient falls asleep. Sometimes they cry. Sometimes they say nothing at all. Reiki meets them exactly where they are and provides what they need.

Who Receives Reiki?

Over the past two years, I've had the quiet privilege of sitting beside so many kinds of patients, each in profoundly vulnerable moments of their lives. I've supported individuals preparing for surgery, their eyes wide with uncertainty. I've offered Reiki to those afterward, bodies sore and systems overwhelmed. I've worked with patients in the middle of intensive treatments, with those navigating long-term chronic illnesses, and with individuals experiencing significant, unrelenting pain. I've also sat with patients at the end of life when the room feels sacred, heavy, and incredibly holy.

Beyond the patients themselves, I've placed my hands gently on parents keeping vigil at a child's bedside, spouses trying to stay strong, and family members holding layers of fear and hope all at once. I've even worked with nurses and hospital staff who quietly carry the emotional weight of caring for others and simply need a moment to reset.

What all these experiences share is this: the nervous system is under strain. Almost always, there is physical or emotional pain, or both, and stress levels are elevated. In a hospital, patients are constantly asked questions. They are touched repeatedly for tests, procedures, and monitoring.

Their bodies become clinical. Their time is not their own. Reiki is often the only moment when someone is with them without needing anything in return. No questions. No agenda. No extraction. Just a steady presence. Just calm. Just space for the body and spirit to soften, even for a few minutes.

Extending Reiki to Parents in the NICU and PICU

In addition to working with patients receiving medical care, some of the most meaningful sessions I offer are for the parents sitting beside them. In the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), parents can spend hours—sometimes days and weeks—perched in a chair next to an incubator or hospital bed. Their bodies are rigid. Their nervous systems are on constant alert. They are watching monitors, listening for any changes, trying to be strong while living in fear and exhaustion.

These sessions are a bit different. A parent may not want to leave their child's side, so I work with them as they sit by their child's bedside, often holding their child. Sometimes they close their eyes for the first time all day. Sometimes they simply exhale in a way that tells me they haven't taken a full breath in hours. Sometimes the baby will turn toward my hands like a flower turning toward the sun. Reiki becomes a moment where families are cared for, too.

Supporting Family Members with Reiki

There are times when I enter a room, and the patient is asleep or out for a procedure. As I chat with

any family or friends present, I often notice the strain, fatigue, and fear in their eyes. I ask if they would like a few minutes of Reiki, reminding them that they, too, deserve time to heal and a few moments of calm. “I didn’t know how much I needed that,” is the most common response to these sessions. In every clinical setting, the patient is the priority—rightly so—but there is always room for more healing, more peace, and more support for their loved ones.

Reiki for Hospital Staff

Like most hospitals in the United States, the nurses and staff at my facility are often stretched to their limits. When possible, I offer a few minutes of Reiki to these individuals as well. These are shorter sessions that provide a quick reset, allowing them to continue their shift a bit more calmly and grounded. These caregivers need care too.

The Privilege of Being Present

It is an incredibly humbling experience to be present during such sensitive situations. Patients, family members, and staff allow a stranger to step into their world and offer quiet support. I do not take that trust lightly. It is truly an honor to be present when presence is needed.

What This Environment Taught Me

Offering Reiki in a clinical setting has changed my understanding of the practice. I stopped needing a peaceful environment to offer peace. I learned to let go of needing feedback. Many times, people fall asleep. Some want to talk. Some don’t react at all. I may

never know what the session meant to them. I learned to trust Reiki without needing to see the results. I’ve learned healing can be as simple as a quiet presence, two hands, and the willingness to sit beside someone—patient, parent, family member, or caregiver—in their moment of need.

My time volunteering in the hospital setting has shown me that Reiki has an integral place alongside conventional medicine. When I enter these spaces, grounded, collaborative, and clear about my role, Reiki doesn’t compete with medicine; it complements it. Reiki becomes part of the continuum of care as it supports the nervous system, softens fear, and honors the whole person.

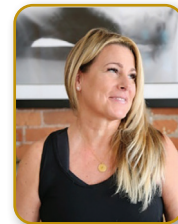
Thinking About Reiki in a Clinical Setting?

If any information in my article resonates with you, I encourage you to explore volunteering in a medical setting. I began this journey because I felt called to give back to a hospital that had supported my family and friends through many vulnerable seasons. When I discovered the Oasis for Healing program, I immediately knew I had found a home. Years prior, I was the mother sitting at her child’s bedside. More recently, I was the grandmother in the NICU, holding hope, navigating uncertainty, and praying for healing. I understood the stress, the waiting, the desperation for a modicum of peace.

What I didn’t initially comprehend about volunteering was the enormous gift I would receive in return. My ability to use Reiki to meet people exactly where they are and create feelings of safety and peace with hospital

patients has grown exponentially. I have become a more grounded and capable practitioner, and perhaps most importantly, a better human being.

If you feel even the slightest nudge toward this kind of service, follow it. Hospitals need calm hands. Families need steady energy. Patients need moments of relief. Your training can be a lifeline in clinical settings. Reach out to your local hospital, inquire about integrative medicine programs, and say “yes” to the opportunity to serve. You may walk in planning to give—and walk out profoundly changed. ■



Kelly is an ICRT Usui/Holy Fire® III Reiki Master. Inspired by her own healing experience, she began her Reiki journey in 2023. Through Kelly McQuire

Yoga, LLC, she offers yoga, meditation, and Reiki, and volunteers with Yale New Haven Hospital’s Oasis for Healing program, providing Reiki to patients, families, and staff. You may contact Kelly at Kelly@KellyMcQuireYoga.com or visit her website <https://kellymcquireyoga.com>.

Endnotes

- ¹ “Complementary and Volunteer Services,” *Yale New Haven Health*, Yale New Haven Hospital, <https://www.ynhh.org/services/support-services/complementary-volunteer>.
- ² “We Want You – To Volunteer at YNHH!” *Advancing Care*, 2024, Issue 3, *Yale New Haven Health Publications*, <https://www.ynhhs.org/publications/advancing-care/2024-3>.
- ³ “Volunteer Services - Yale New Haven Hospital,” *Yale New Haven Health*, Yale New Haven Hospital, <https://www.ynhh.org/about/community/volunteers>.