



# A Nurse-Managed Healing Touch Clinic at a Veterans Administration Medical Center

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In today's changing healthcare environment, consumers and providers are seeking the integration of Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH) modalities into traditional healthcare settings (Anderson et al, 2016). The use of complementary therapies has grown exponentially over the past few years for improved health and well-being, relief of chronic disease symptoms and associated side effects of conventional medical therapies. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and the National Institutes of Health's National Center of Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH), more than 30 percent of adults use some type of alternative or complementary treatment such as herbal and dietary supplements, deep breathing, tai-chi, yoga, acupuncture and massage therapy (<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>). Healthcare consumers are seeking complementary treatments for a variety of ailments, including pain, chronic fatigue and mental health illnesses.

In addition, consumers are looking for options to manage their healthcare concerns and want to play a more active role in their management (Swengros et al, 2014). As health delivery systems are trying to respond to metrics that demand increased efficiency, safety and customer satisfaction, they are more willing to try new approaches to meet patients' demands in healthcare services that include CIH. NCCIH de-

fines alternative therapies as non-mainstream therapies that are used instead of conventional medical therapy; whereas, complementary therapies are used in conjunction with mainstream treatment to improve patients' health and well-being (NCCIH; Eschiti 2007). Bringing conventional and complementary treatment modalities together in a coordinated way is the definition of integrative care (<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>). Integrative care seeks to restore and maintain health and wellness across a person's lifespan by providing the best care that is least invasive and most economical (Rakel, 2012).

Among the post combat Veteran population, there is a significant increase in episodes of chronic pain, insomnia, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The high prevalence of these conditions ultimately leads to chronic disease, mental and physical debilitation, polypharmacy and adverse events that, over time, lead to long-term high personal, healthcare and societal costs (Khusid and Vythilingam, 2016). The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is therefore looking at developing and incorporating integrative therapies that are safer, noninvasive and non-pharmacologic to provide holistic care to Veterans suffering from post-deployment mental and physical symptoms. The VA has set a strategic goal to provide Veterans with personalized, proactive and patient-driven healthcare that prioritizes Veterans



and their values and partners with them to create a strategy to optimize their health and well-being (VHA 2013-2018 Strategic Plan). The VA recognizes that in order to achieve health and wellness a holistic approach, that moves beyond traditional approaches and places Veterans and their preferences at the center of care, is needed. In light of Veterans' growing interest in non-traditional health care options, the VA is responding by making CIH options available.

The Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago has embraced the concept of integrating CIH into its care delivery model and offers such programs as

tion and expansion of a Healing Touch clinic within the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center.

### Background

Energy-based and hands-on healing interventions have been used in many cultures around the world throughout history (Anderson and Taylor, 2011; Maville, Bowen and Benham, 2008; Eschiti, 2007). Rooted in the ancient Eastern cultures, these complementary therapies are now gaining momentum in mainstream medicine. In 2001, the National Center for Complementary Therapy and Alternative Medicine referred to these therapies as "bio-field therapies." According

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yoga, mindfulness based meditation, biofeedback, acupuncture and Healing Touch through its Whole Health program. These programs are well marketed to Veterans and employees throughout the facility via posters, newsletters and emails. Electronic consults are available for providers to refer Veterans to any of these modalities. Utilization of these services is contingent upon Veteran and provider knowledge, awareness and perceptions of the CIH modalities being offered.

Healing Touch is a CIH modality that is an evidence-based, bio-field therapy used in a variety of clinical settings, such as pain centers, pre-operative and post anesthesia recovery and cancer centers. The reported benefits of Healing Touch include decreased pain, depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as increased feelings of relaxation and a sense of overall well-being (Anderson, and Taylor, 2011; Eschiti, 2007; Wilkinson, et.al., 2002). This modality has increasingly been accepted among Veterans, nurses and providers at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center as a safe, non-pharmacologic complementary therapy that fits well within the VA's patient-centered care model. The purpose of this article is to discuss the implementa-

tion to the Healing Touch Worldwide Foundation, Healing Touch is a bio-field therapy that utilizes an "intention-based" and "hand-mediated" heart-centered approach to healing.

In addition to the physical dimension, human beings have spiritual and energetic dimensions that must be taken into account during the healing process (Aghabati, Mohammadi, & Pour Esmail, 2008). In a healthy individual, energy flows evenly through a symmetrical and balanced energy field. However, any disturbance in the energy field can lead to disease (dis-ease). The goal of Healing Touch is to restore balance in the energy system and allow clients the opportunity to self-heal. Healing Touch non-invasively affects the human energy system, thus clearing, energizing and balancing the human and environmental energy fields. Once these imbalances and disturbances in the energy field are cleared, the energy channels are able to resume their task of integrating the body, mind and spirit to restore health and promote healing.

Healing Touch was developed in the 1980s by Janet Mentgen, a Registered Nurse, who blended her





energy healing skills with her knowledge of ancient healing practices, as well as with the healing theories of energy healers such as Brugh Joy and Barbara Brennan (Dowd et al, 2006). Healing Touch Program (HTP) is a peer-reviewed program that consists of five levels of training. Endorsed by the American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) and the Canadian Holistic Nurses Association (CHNA) HTP is an accredited provider of continuing nursing education by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission of Accreditation. (<http://www.healingtouchprogram.com/about/endorsements-accreditations>). Multiple studies have shown that Healing Touch may decrease pain and anxiety and improve quality of life in various patient populations. Due to growing popularity and ease of delivery, this modality is being used more frequently within hospital environments.

The role of Healing Touch practitioners is to facilitate self-healing by grounding themselves before beginning a session. (Anderson and Taylor, 2011). The practitioner then assesses the client's energy field and notes any areas of energetic congestion or blockage. She/he sets an intention for the highest good of the client and utilizes various hand techniques that consist of either light on or off the body touch to help connect, open and balance the client's energy field and energy centers.

Research studies have been conducted that show the effectiveness of Healing Touch in both chronic and acute pain management, symptom management and comfort measures for patients undergoing cancer treatment and end of life care (Wardell and Weymouth, 2004) as well as PTSD, depression, anxiety and insomnia. Therefore Healing Touch is a simple treatment modality that can benefit Veterans who have a wide range of health care concerns.

### Conceptual Framework

According to nursing theorist, Jean Watson, "Healing Touch is an example of an intentional caring-healing modality grounded in an ethics, philosophy, values and consciousness consistent with my original Theory of Human Caring and Transpersonal Caring...they

both work from an energetic framework of Universal Love as the basis of all healing and caring-healing relationships." ([www.WatsonCaringScience.org](http://www.WatsonCaringScience.org)). As many of our Veterans suffer from PTSD, anxiety, pain and a lack of support systems, they can benefit from this caring relationship that is in alignment with the goal of forming working partnerships with our Veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.

### Implementation

Healing Touch was initially introduced at the Jesse Brown VA in 2007 by a Palliative Care Nurse Practitioner after learning about it during a pain conference. She then introduced it to the staff during an interdisciplinary Pain Awareness presentation. Staff were intrigued by the results and wanted to learn more. Hence, approval was received from leadership and grant funding was obtained to bring training to Jesse Brown VA. The first Healing Touch Level 1 class was offered in 2009 and since then, 148 staff have completed the Level 1 training and several others have moved on to complete Levels 2 and 3. There are currently three staff who have completed Level 4 training and two who have completed Level 5.

In 2011 a weekly clinic was established with four, one-hour appointment slots staffed by the Nurse Practitioner (NP) who introduced Healing Touch to the facility. The clinic's goal was to target all Veterans and employees who presented to the clinic via provider or self-referral. An electronic consult was also established for providers to formally refer Veterans to the clinic with various diagnoses including PTSD, military sexual trauma (MST), pain, anxiety and depression.

Over time, the Healing Touch clinic became very successful and experienced an increase in referrals. As a result, wait times for new clinic appointments as well as follow up appointments increased making it difficult to meet demands. Due to this increased demand, facility leadership supported the opening of a second clinic for follow up visits. However, because of limited resources and space availability, only one half-day clinic with six appointment slots every third Friday of the month could be started. The follow-up



clinic operates with two rooms and is staffed by two nurses trained as a Healing Touch Practitioner (Level 5) and an HTP-Apprentice (Level 4) respectively.

### Clinic Visits

Clients who present for their initial Healing Touch visit are often those who feel their current pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical treatments are not providing adequate relief of their symptoms and are looking for an alternative therapy. In addition, they may feel they are prescribed too many medications and are concerned about medication side effects. Often providers, who are familiar with energy therapy and believe in its merit, will refer clients. Client expectations at the initial visit vary based on their understanding of and prior experiences with integrative therapies. Generally, there are two types of clients who present—those who have no idea what to expect from a treatment session and those who have past experiences in complementary therapies and/or may be energetically sensitive themselves.

During the first visit, the Healing Touch provider assesses the client's level of understanding, level of interest and engagement. Based upon this assessment, the Veteran is educated about what to expect during the session and the potential benefits of therapy are discussed. After obtaining verbal consent from the client, an intake form is completed to get an overall understanding of the client's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual status. Client questions are answered at any time throughout the HT session. Based on the baseline assessment and chief complaint, the Healing Touch provider helps the client set goals for the session. Remaining fully clothed, the client then lies on the treatment table for a session. The provider

assesses for any energetic imbalances in the client's bio-field and then grounds and attunes to the client through light touch. Healing Touch techniques are chosen based upon the provider's assessments and intuition. After the session, the client's bio-field is reassessed and feedback is obtained from the client.

Client responses vary widely immediately after a treatment session. The majority of clients verbalize a feeling of relaxation and sense of well-being. Some clients indicate they feel "different." Many clients verbalize a reduction in their presenting symptoms. The session is reviewed with the client and a plan is developed for client self-care activities at home such as exercise, journaling and meditation. Some Healing Touch techniques that the client can perform on him/herself at home are also taught. The client is then offered an invitation to return for a follow-up visit. After the treatment, the provider documents the session in the electronic medical record.

During follow-up visits, the client's goals from their previous session are reviewed and new goals are established, if necessary. Clients' self-care homework is also reviewed and any barriers or successes are discussed. They are then energetically reassessed and treated based on the assessment and their primary concern for that visit. Clients are offered continued support and Healing Touch therapy based on mutually set short-term and long-term goals. They are then reassigned homework for self-care management. Repeat appointments are offered and scheduled based on client need and appointment availability.

### Challenges and Lessons Learned

Healing Touch has served a great need for the Veterans at Jesse Brown VA as a complementary therapy to their conventional treatment plans. However, there have been some challenges and limitations such as dedicated space and staff availability. The once a week, initial clinic is held in the bereavement room of the Emergency Department and is not available any other day. The monthly follow-up clinic utilizes two exam rooms in one of the outpatient clinics late on a Friday afternoon when clinic traffic has slowed down

*The majority of clients verbalize a feeling of relaxation and sense of well-being.*



Treatment tables cannot be accommodated in the clinic exam rooms, so exam tables have to be utilized, which are shorter in length and not as comfortable as treatment tables. Due to the lack of dedicated space, the Healing Touch providers have little place to store treatment tables and related equipment.

Though we have more than 100 trained staff, it is difficult for them to be released to help in the Healing Touch clinic due to the workload demands in other patient care areas. Therefore, there are currently only three dedicated staff who practice in the clinic and two to three additional staff who help on occasion. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial if a protocol had been established that would have allowed staff to actively participate in Healing Touch activities in the clinic after training. Another problem is the lack of ancillary support staff to make appointments and reminder phone calls. The providers have to make follow-up appointments and send reminder letters themselves which can be time consuming. Because the demand for initial consults and follow up visits has surpassed the number of available clinic slots, there is a pressing need for an expansion of services.

## Future Growth and Expansion

As the demand continues to grow, it would be beneficial to have more dedicated Healing Touch providers available to meet those needs. There is still much work to be done, particularly through educating the medical staff and Veterans about the benefits of Healing Touch for relief of chronic disease symptoms. The current practice has successfully demonstrated improvement in symptoms and quality of life for Veterans by alleviating anxiety, decreasing pain and pain medication use, and promoting relaxation using a caring, holistic and non-invasive approach.

There continues to be a struggle in expanding the program and streamlining Healing Touch care with routine medical care of the Veterans. With support from the integrative medicine community, Healing Touch can certainly gain a well-deserved permanent place at any Veteran's facility. In order to serve more Veterans and enhance quality of care, it will be necessary to expand the current program by addressing the following:

1. Better education of the medical staff and providers.
2. Better marketing of the HT program.
3. Incorporation of Healing Touch into the patient's plan of care.
4. Patient education about the program by the providers.
5. Additional release time for trained staff.
6. Dedicated clinic space.
7. Additional clinic time slots.
8. Ancillary support staff to help market our program, make appointments, make reminder phone calls and mail appointment letters.

In addition to resources, the Healing Touch clinic would benefit from research projects that can help validate the efficacy and efficiency of its efforts.

The World Health Organization (1983) defines "health" as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Kemper et.al, (2011) reported that mind-body modalities reduce stress, improve mental health, mood, compassion, calmness and sleep. In implementing Healing Touch, we can easily track measurable healthcare outcomes such as pain, anxiety, depression, fatigue and quality of life parameters. This modality holds a great deal of potential in filling the care gaps that cannot be filled by conventional medicine. Our future goals are to expand Healing Touch to all areas of the hospital, including inpatient areas, and conduct research studies which can in turn provide a valuable contribution to our organization's shift toward enhancing integrative patient-centered care in all dimensions. €



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