Reiki and Recovery

BY ANDREA RAE, B.S., RMP AND EILEEN WURST, M.A., RMT

In our fast-paced world, the problem of addiction is becoming more prevalent. As life becomes complicated, we turn to alcohol, drugs, food, sex, love, gambling, overworking, and television to numb our emotional and physical pain and escape our confusion. Many have found that the use of Reiki as an adjunct to traditional therapies has been a useful way to softly work with the core issues that trigger addictive behaviors.

A common misconception within Western society is that life is meant to be happy all the time, but as human beings we experience a range of emotions—grief, fear, anger, love, joy, sadness. In Buddhist literature, they talk of emotions being like weather. Sometimes we feel caught in a cloud of grief, desperate to escape the bad weather, but as hard as we try we cannot seem to escape it. It is in times like this that some have chosen drugs, alcohol, or food to mask their pain. Since these behaviors aren’t real solutions, the pain returns and requires repeated use of the substance, and this can quickly lead to addiction. Engaging in addictive behaviors to avoid our emotions isn’t healthy, and many people get stuck in a loop of avoidance and substance abuse.

When we resist feeling our emotions, the emotional pain is often exacerbated. The act of avoiding can result in more suffering and pain, forcing us back into our loop of seeking the substance or activity of choice to avoid the growing intensity of our emotions. Over time this becomes a strong habitual behavior, which becomes very difficult to break.

One way of looking at different levels of addiction is presented by Charlotte Kasl in Women, Sex, and Addiction. She identifies four levels: pattern, habit, compulsion, and addiction. Many of us possess patterns and habits that we have developed to cope with life and to manage our feelings, but that does not always mean we have an addiction. It is worth exploring our tendencies no matter where we fall on the continuum as a way to grow and become more aware. Addictions always start somewhere, and becoming aware of our patterns will help us to notice if a habit or compulsive tendency is actually heading towards addiction.

Addictions can be highly destructive to our lives, but compulsions, habits, or patterns can numb us to life, leading to a robotic, mechanical experience of life. Emotions are not something to be afraid of. We shy away from our emotions based on our conditioning, our judgments, and our fear that we will not be loved if we show how we feel, but exploration of our emotions can actually enhance our life. In suppressing our grief, our anger, our fear, inadvertently we shut out joy, or we experience joy only with the feeling of fear and tension lurking in the background. Life is exhausting when we are expending energy on a constant basis to hold our feelings down.

Suppressing emotion drains our core energy reserves, and adds stress to our body. Over time, we accumulate painful events in our life that we stash away and don’t process. For many, there is a deep sense of grief and loneliness related to these unac-
knowledged parts. We have deserted parts of ourselves on some level. For example, for those who have experienced trauma as a child, whether that be physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, these experiences remain locked in the cells of the body, and no amount of denying makes the nagging, feeling go away. In these situations, allowing ourselves to connect to the body feels awful, so we find a way to disassociate from our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves so we don’t have to connect with the debris that remains from those traumas. We set ourselves up for life with a growing need to suppress our feelings. It becomes imperative that we do anything we can to hide ourselves behind our addictions so that no one discovers what is within. This is the vicious cycle of addiction and denial that we enter believing we have no choice. It is only by admitting that we have a problem that we can commit to dealing with the core issues that underlie our addiction.

Reiki Treatment Methods and Hand Positions

In exploring addictive patterns during Reiki sessions, clients are encouraged to accept their feelings, and to be curious about how the emotion feels in their body. Clients are encouraged to allow the emotion to surface and be expressed. To express the emotion the client might feel the urge to cry or to make noises, such as sighing or screaming. A system like Reiki views all emotion as “just energy,” so rather than suppressing the expression of this emotion, a Reiki session helps release the emotion and the resistance to the emotion. No emotion is viewed as negative and no judgment is attached to any emotion. The Reiki energy makes the process of releasing emotions smoother.

As seen in the case studies, it is important for an individual suffering from an addiction or compulsion to become aware of their patterns in times of stress, as it is typical for stress to trigger addictions. Specific stress triggers may be: getting fired, starting a new job, divorce, moving house, family illness, and death. These triggers can make life more difficult to cope with and can push us into feeling the need for greater control, which ironically results in individuals using addictive substances and activities to suppress the feeling that life seems out of control. If the clients learn how to give Reiki to themselves, they have at their disposal a technique they can use to self-soothe through such cycles to aid them in moving back to balance.

Another effective tool for dealing with addiction issues is a method Eileen developed called Bodywork Counseling. It is a nondirective method in which the client initially scans the body in their mind, identifying any areas that are causing discomfort. They are then encouraged to examine the feeling or sensation more closely, sharing anything that comes to them if they wish to (clients are not required to share insights). The practitioner continues to give Reiki energy either moving through the standard hand positions, or as guided by intuition. The client is gently guided to notice any colors, sounds, textures, and thoughts that arise during this exploration. The client is always in control of the session and is supported in exploring the energies that arise in the body. For some, the session can become a journey in which emotions are released at a deep level. Often profound insights can be revealed during these sessions.

Alternatively, you can offer Reiki as you would to any other client, allowing your intuition to guide you to the areas that need Reiki. We have noticed some patterns in our sessions, and the following is a sample of common hand positions used when working with a client with addiction problems.

Hand Positions

**Head.** Place hands on either side of the head over the temples.

**Back of the head.** Place either one or both hands under the head, above the occipital ridge.

**Neck and Forehead.** Slide one hand under the neck, below the occipital ridge; the other hand can be held lightly across the
One client, Simone, now in her late thirties, had used amphet-
amine. Reiki students often have addictions in their personal histories.

**Case Study 1**

Reiki brings to light whatever emotions are being suppressed by the addiction. Eileen has found that several of her clients and Reiki students often have addictions in their personal histories. One client, Simone, now in her late thirties, had used amphet-
mines on a regular basis over a period of almost ten years to dist-
tance herself from the pain she felt of not being loved and cared for in her family of origin. She felt that her parents, who both suffered from varying degrees of depression, had emotionally abandoned her, especially after the birth of her younger brother and their subsequent divorce.

Simone told Eileen she felt quite isolated, like many children who have gone through emotional trauma. When Simone was a young teenager, her “friends” turned her on to “speed,” an amphetamine. Simone had begun developing a body-image dis-
order and was glad to take a drug to lessen her appetite and keep her weight down “like the models in the magazines.” The drug also made her feel “far away” from the pain and depression she was often in.

Eating disorders, like addictions, are compulsive and destruct-
ive in nature. Simone received some counseling during this time with moderate success. She thought that numbing herself to the pain was the only way she could cope while she lived at home. When she left to go to college, she switched from speed to food to numb herself, gaining weight again, which further amplified her image disorder.

After graduation, Simone returned home and used speed to “lose the thirty pounds” she had gained and to “survive” her new job. Simone worked as a reporter for her local newspaper. She had been a journalism major and enjoyed finding the “root of the story,” perhaps an element that had often kept hidden or not addressed in her earlier years. Her job was demanding. Taking speed allowed her to stay up through the night to meet the dead-
lines. Then she would drink to “come down” and detach from the emotional content of the stories she covered. By the time she was in her midtwenties, Simone was making a name for her-
self at the newspaper, but her body was falling apart. She knew she had to find another way to cope with stress and the strong emotions she was feeling.

She joined a gym and became involved in a yoga class there. She found the meditations and postures very helpful in easing her body and mind back to center. But she still worked in a very hectic environment and would drink four to six cups of coffee to allow her to “catch up” and alcohol to “slow down and detach.”

While Simone was in the gym, she saw a flyer for Reiki train-
ing. Over the next two years Eileen worked with her in her Reiki studies. Simone told Eileen she has found that the method of self-Reiki (specifically over her solar plexus and heart area) combined with her yoga practice enabled her to keep herself in relative emotional balance. She no longer takes speed or alco-
hol. She admits she does still drink coffee in the morning, but it’s usually just one or two cups.

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**Case Studies**

Each study is based on clients that both Eileen Wurst, M.A., RMT and Andrea Rae, B.S., RMP have worked with. The client names have been changed to protect their identities.

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When the stresses of her life seem to make her feel askew, Simone sets up a session with Eileen (usually every two or three
months) to assist her in “jump-starting the energy” to help her get back to that place of center that helps her feel most calm.

Case Study 2

Joanna was brought up in a regular middle-class family. She was a friendly, easygoing person, but she felt tension, anxiety, and anger that she could not really explain. As she hit her teenage years, her friends started to drink, and Joanna found drinking was a way to make the tension go away. She began to drink, but she always drank more than her friends, wanting to delay returning to her own life, her own feelings, and her confusion.

By the time she went to college, Joanna was drinking excessively, eating compulsively— which she had done even as a young child—smoking pot, and having one night stands, but because this is common during this stage of life and she had many friends who were doing the same, she did not realize she had a problem. As she got older, others grew out of these patterns, but Joanna found that she couldn’t live without her addictions. Without her addictions she felt intense inner turmoil, self-loathing, and rage. At times it was unbearable to be in her own skin. She couldn’t get away from the nagging feeling that she was a bad person, and that one day someone would find this out. She decided she wanted to discover the truth.

Joanna began to learn Reiki. Initially, when Joanna learned Reiki she found it difficult to receive, preferring to give. In receiving Reiki, her body flinched involuntarily. Although this eased over time, she still often felt agitated receiving Reiki, even though she did enjoy it. Gradually she learned to receive Reiki and to allow herself to express her emotions in the presence of her colleagues and Reiki practitioners. She began to feel some relief from this work as she released old patterns of thinking. She also started to accept her emotions, although this wasn’t always easy. As she did, her need to use alcohol, food, and pot lessened. Although she still had addictive urges, she was able to control them. But she still had the feeling that there was something at the root of her problems that she hadn’t uncovered yet.

Joanna entered counseling at the same time she started Reiki. It took several years of counseling for Joanna to discover the truth, that she had been sexually abused as a child. Although she had suspected this, it came as a shock. It became clear that her trauma had been at the core, relating to her low self-esteem, her patterns of self-blame, her feelings of being a bad person, and her addiction patterns using food, alcohol, and drugs. As she worked through this trauma, she gained a clearer awareness of her emotions and began to recognize her patterns.

Joanna noticed that as she processed these difficult memories, she became consumed with rage and “destructive energy,” which made it difficult to be around people, to work, and to live a normal life. In the past, she would keep these emotions in so she could function, using alcohol, food, or drugs to control her feelings. Now, rather than being self-destructive, she chooses options that are nurturing, energizing, and empowering, such as self-Reiki, sports, walking, biking, and meditation, to manage her feelings. Joanna uses self-Reiki everyday, and regularly receives Reiki. The urges are still there and she does lapse, but her awareness has helped her to realize that she doesn’t want to hurt herself anymore, that the abuse was not her fault, that she is not a bad person, and that she deserves to have a happy life.

During Reiki sessions, she often feels fear and her body shakes as she connects with her feelings. She needs a lot of reassurance and support, and is always encouraged to go at her own pace. Sessions with Joanna are usually intuitively led, but common hand positions are the head, the heart, solar plexus, lower abdomen, and the kidneys. At times when the fear is particularly present, she experiences a sharp feeling in the kidneys, which in Traditional Chinese Medicine relates to fear. She enjoys receiving Reiki over the kidneys and finds it very calming and reassuring.
Case Study 3

Eddie came from a background in which his father and grandfather had been “heavy social drinkers,” which in today’s terminology would have classified them as alcoholics. His father preoccupied himself with work and, often, another woman, and then when he did come home, he imbibed several hard cocktails. Eddie’s mother struggled with her husband’s infidelity and “numbing out,” and eventually got involved herself in an illicit relationship. She often crossed boundaries into sexually inappropriate comments and touch that bordered on what today is considered sexual abuse. Growing up, Eddie’s need to feel love became his prime focus and drive, which led to the addiction that plagued him through his adulthood.

In high school Eddie found it hard to define appropriate boundaries. Eddie’s good looks attracted some young men and women, so that by age fifteen he had five lovers at the same time. It gave him a sense of “high” he had never experienced before.

When he eventually moved out of state to go to college, he felt a big gap where the lovers had been. Eddie became involved with several anonymous lovers. During holiday break a girlfriend from back home visited him. Eddie fell “in love” with her and eventually returned home and married her.

But soon after returning, he realized he could not be faithful to her. His old patterns of having multiple lovers returned to ease the ache and pain of moving, starting over, defining himself, etc. This time, the new lovers were co-workers and good friends of his wife. Over the course of several years his addiction had resulted in nearly a dozen others.

One of his girlfriends was a nurse. She encouraged him to go back to school for nursing and introduced him to Reiki. It was the first time in his adult life he allowed himself to be still and “receive” bodywork. Not sexual touch. Not passionate touch. Nurturing, compassionate touch. As he began working with Reiki on himself he was able to self-soothe. Instead of turning to a lover, creating another relationship, he only needed to bring forth the higher vibration of Reiki into his being. In a way, the energy was his “love substitute.”

Soon after taking his Reiki I class, his wife found out about all his affairs and she filed for divorce. Eventually he met Trish, a woman who stood out from the others because she was interested in the emerging authentic self of Eddie. He began committing physically, mentally, and emotionally to this one woman. Within two years, they were married.

Eddie continued with his Reiki training and took a more active role as a Reiki practitioner, incorporating it into his practice as an emergency-room nurse. There were several occasions when colleagues or other practitioners would flirt with him, but his heart had become true to Trish.

Several years went by and then Trish began changing her career focus. Eddie was promoted to a nursing supervisory position, which brought about a lot of fear of failure for him. Into that tumultuous change walked Janice, a doctor nearly fifteen years his senior, reminiscent of his mother in many ways, including violating boundaries and making sexual innuendos. Eddie felt quite helpless to her seduction, and his need for “love, affection, and reassurance” was at its strongest. Eddie knew it was wrong, yet he felt powerless to call the affair off. Being with Janice gave him that “high” again. This is when Eddie started to see Eileen for sessions.

After receiving several Reiki sessions, Eddie did begin to limit the amount of contact he had with Janice and eventually ended their relationship. In the past several months, Eddie has confessed to Trish of this affair, and in reconciling their differences they give and receive Reiki sessions with each other on a weekly basis. Eddie gives himself Reiki treatments each day and has also joined a support group, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.

Eddie has told Eileen that he feels that there will mostly always be a part of him that craves the love and affection he didn’t receive in childhood, yet he realizes that to seek it in multiple relationships is unhealthy and dishonoring. In addition,
Eddie has begun reaching out to other friends for love and support when stress gets too strong for him to handle. He is learning and growing through his addiction along the Reiki path.

**Additional Support Strategies**

Support is necessary in times of high stress for anyone with addiction issues. Without additional supports, an addiction can strike quickly. The following suggestions are ideas that can form a supportive framework as part of your everyday life. You should not wait for a crisis to hit to introduce these ideas into your life. If you have addiction issues, it is important to use strategies to prevent a crisis from occurring.

**Counseling in conjunction with Reiki.** If you have an addiction, seeing a licensed therapist who specializes in addictions in addition to receiving Reiki treatments is highly recommended.

**Attending AA, NA, and SA groups.** The validation and support experienced in such settings are often key tools towards recovery.

**Self-Reiki** is a great tool to use when emotions are charged. Common places to give yourself Reiki during these times are the heart and the upper and lower abdomen. These correspond to three chakras centers—heart (fourth), solar plexus (third), and navel (second) chakra—but you should also follow your intuition if it directs you to an area other than these.

**Reiki Circles.** Attending local Reiki Circles to give and receive Reiki is a great support. If you don’t have one in your area, start one yourself!

**SHK** is the mental emotional symbol that means “to create a new habit,” and it is useful to incorporate into your self-Reiki routine and sessions with your clients. Diane Ruth Shewmaker outlined a process of using SHK to clear addictions in the Summer 2003 issue of this magazine. Specifically, she used this procedure to clear her own cigarette addiction. It would be valuable to refer to this procedure.

**Master Symbol.** If you have completed Reiki III, then the Master Symbol can be used when addictive urges are strong. It gives you a deep connection to the inner flow of Reiki beyond the emotional level.

**Reiki in the home.** Surrounding yourself with Reiki gives you the feeling that you are in a cushion of Reiki. Using CKR, the power symbol, you can clear your home, your workspace, and your car. If you are drinking or taking drugs, the residual energy will be present in the house, so it is useful to clear out this heavier energy in addition to giving yourself Reiki. You will notice a big difference in the way the house feels.

**Distance Reiki.** You can also send distance Reiki to your addiction to help you release your addiction. As an example, using the distance Reiki symbol, visualize yourself with the urge to drink, or eat, or go out to the local casino. Send Reiki to the situation, and to strengthen this, identify an intention that will focus you on your commitment to release your addiction.

**Meditation** will certainly be of benefit in working with the rapid thought processes that can be common for people with addictions. It is common to get into patterns of compulsive negative thinking, self-hating, and self-hating habits. For some, meditation can help calm these thoughts and give you the space to let go of these habits. Connecting with earth energy is particularly useful in calming fear.

**Yoga** is often referred to as a moving meditation, so if still meditation is not working, meditation on movement in yoga can be a useful tool. It connects you with the body, allowing you to get in touch with the physical rather than the mental. At the end of a yoga session, you will often feel more connected and centered. Regular practice as part of your routine will support you working towards being more connected with yourself. Another moving meditation is Tai Chi. Reiki can be channelled at the same time you practice either of these.

**Letting loose.** At the core of addiction is the need to control. Too much control in our lives is not healthy. When an addiction takes hold, you find yourself out of control with little energy to hold everything together. In recovering from addictions, it
is necessary to control addictive urges, so to counterbalance this it is important to find a way to “let loose,” to release control in some aspect of your life. This could be dancing or expressing yourself artistically by painting, sculpting, or collaging with no rules. Incorporating “letting loose” time into your life releases some of the pressure from needing to control other aspects of your life.

**Connecting with nature.** Walking is a very calming, centering activity. Connecting with the energy of nature, the trees, the leaves, the flowers, the earth will connect you to your inner energy flow through the connection with the purity of the energy of nature. Thoughts become clearer, solutions to problems arise, and the inner commotion begins to settle down.

**Music.** Playing or listening to music, be that tranquil healing music or rock and roll, connects us with our inner energy flow. It can be very freeing to listen to loud rock and roll, which may tap into our inner teenager, giving us a method of freeing that charged emotion. Playing music is a way of aligning with our core energy, and in the same way that meditation or yoga leaves us in a blissful place, music can take us there too. Toning is also a powerful way of centering our energies.

**Sport.** Sports are a way to connect with our bodies and a way to release pent-up emotions. Physical activity will aid the flow of energy in the body. There are many sports that can act as an outlet for anger or frustration in a productive rather than a destructive way. It is a great stress reliever.

**Conclusion**

The benefit of exploring and challenging our addictions with Reiki is the healthy and often profound shifts that can occur in our lives. Emotions that have been with us for eons can quickly rise to the surface, issues that we have been hiding from suddenly don’t seem anywhere near as bad as we thought they were, and in counseling sessions we move through issues much more quickly than we imagined. Although at times we feel thrown back into those old patterns of feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, these times don’t seem to last as long and don’t seem to have the same intensity. As we face our fears and our emotions, we find that we can live a different, more complete life. It becomes evident that there are many parts of life that we have been missing out on by numbing ourselves. Now we are able to make an informed decision to face all parts of life. We begin to find hidden complexities in the emotion of grief, we discover an inner well of power that was hidden by our fear, and we discover the humor and fun that can be a part of our anger. Emotions are not unilateral. Getting to know our emotions and developing a relationship with our emotions allows us to live with them and hopefully avoid falling into the trap of addiction.

In essence the debris or the imprint of the past clouds the truth of who we really are. As we offer Reiki, it helps clear this aside to allow the truth within to shine through and illuminate our patterns and addictions for what they really are. The truth is that under it all, we are perfect and the perceived imperfections are an illusion that distracts us from the truth of who we really are. Our addictions, our issues, our problems don’t disappear when we discover the truth, but their significance fades. Surrounding ourselves with Reiki and doing things that connect us with source energy make life manageable and give us a simple way of accessing our bliss. Reiki connects us with that part of ourselves that remembers joy and bliss, and the beauty is that Reiki can be accessed any time.

**References**


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—Andrea Rae is an occupational therapist, and Eileen Wurst is a social worker. Both can be contacted through their website at www.reikitrainingprogram.com
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