

The Energizer

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"Energy Healer" Rhonda Lenair says she can stop alcoholism with her bare hands. Too good to be true? Alicia Potter investigates.

Every night, while her young son slept, Mary Day drank. She didn't always get drunk, but she downed enough alcohol -three or more White Russians a night -to make her worry. Worry that she couldn't relax without it; that she wasn't able to stop; that she was endangering her son. Three years into this ritual, Day vowed to quit. But she didn't call her doctor or a rehab clinic or her local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. "Sitting around with a bunch of people who drank and talking about it didn't appeal to me," says Day, a thirty-eight-year-old, no-nonsense accountant. So she chose what she believed to be the quickest, easiest path to sobriety: She called Rhonda Lenair, an "energy healer."

At her Newbury, Massachusetts, clinic and home, Lenair asked no questions about Day's troubles or drinking habits. In fact, the two spoke very little. Instead Lenair had Day stretch out on an eggplant-purple sofa, abloom with floral pillows. She placed one hand on Day's forehead, another on the back of her head. Then Lenair "read" and "rebalanced" Day's energy-sort of like an internal feng shui session. The result? Less than an hour later, Day says her urge to drink was gone. One year later, she hasn't had a single drink. "I wanted to walk in, see someone, and have her take away the desire, so I could move on," says Day, who also kicked smoking almost three years ago with Lenair's help. "And that's what happened."

Lenair, forty-five, says that since she opened her clinic in 1987, she has treated 25,000 patients for a variety of problems: alcoholism, smoking, eating disorders, overweight, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive and post-traumatic stress disorders. But recently, she's begun to specialize in alcohol addiction. "My treatments proved to be more effective for drinking than for anything else," Lenair says. She and her husband, Barry Chalfin, claim that 95 percent of her patients-even those quaking with detox symptoms-leave her clinic without the urge to drink. Last August, she began guaranteeing results: Clients who do not immediately go on the wagon can return for a free second treatment. Of the 130 patients she's seen for alcohol problems since, she says, just one has taken her up on it.

These are hot times for millennia-old energy healing, which encompasses everything from acupuncture to prayer. Hundreds of hospitals now use therapeutic touch and, to a lesser degree, reiki (in which practitioners manipulate energy without touching the body) as part of their complementary-care programs. Healing schools such as the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, in Boca Raton, Florida, and the Jaffe Institute of Spiritual and Medical Healing, in Angwin, California, report that they're seeing an increase of hospital types in their classes. "Clearly, there are plenty of people within medicine who are open to the possibility that something helpful or at least reassuring is going on," says James S. Gordon, MD, director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., and chair of the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy. But what exactly is going on biologically is still not known, Gordon says, though some well-designed studies, several funded by the National Institutes of Health, are finally under way. "I think we're at the very earliest stages of having a clue," he says.

In keeping with the trend of combining alternative and mainstream medicine, Lenair is gaining acceptance from the medical establishment. She says she's cradled the heads of many doctors and nurses, who have gone on to recommend her to their patients.

In person, however, Lenair is as satisfyingly ethereal as you'd hope a healer would be. A former ballet dancer, she has a lithe, delicate frame, almond eyes, and a calm, almost expressionless face. She works out of her English cottage-style home, outfitted with statues of angels and Greek deities in the front yard and a "healing garden" and mini-temple out back.

Reared in Boston, she became interested in energy healing when, at sixteen, she fell ill while auditioning for a dance festival in London. The British doctor who treated her said she had a "strong electromagnetic field" and encouraged her to pursue energy healing. Upon returning to the States, she started studying healing in her spare time. She pored over books on physics, psychology, biology, and herbalism. She also began exploring medical intuition, the energy-related ability to intuitively diagnose others' illnesses. After years of practicing on her dogs (she says she visibly improved her poodle's moodiness), Lenair saw her reputation as a healer flourish after the proprietor of a local herb store suggested that another customer, a nurse suffering from alcohol addiction, visit her. The woman did and, according to Lenair, immediately quit drinking. Word spread. By 1985, Lenair had a steady flow of clients.

Today, Lenair charges \$1,625 for a three-session treatment. Per hour, that's a lot more than the costliest of therapists, but it's also a fraction of the \$100,000 one of her patients shelled out for fifteen failed trips to rehab before she sought out Lenair. And for less well-heeled drinkers, Lenair has recently established a nonprofit healing foundation, which, according to her Web site, will funnel tax-deductible donations to those who prove they cannot afford her price tag. Oh, and some money will also go to, among other things, finishing that healing garden.

When I interview Lenair at her home, she leads me into her office, alights on a chair, and, as she talks for more than an hour, is nearly as still as her statues. She sits with her hands clasped, her ballerina-straight back never quite denting the cushions. Her speech is soft and intelligent, though elliptically Confucian ("To disconnect from everyone and everything allows you to connect to everyone"). At one point, I wonder if she's blinking enough.

Lenair tells me that when she lays her hands on her clients' heads, she is able to, in effect, scan their bodies and read them as if she were an ultrasound machine. Her "X rays" gather emotional and physical data from the body's electromagnetic field, which she then uses to diagnose her clients. Do they need their eyes checked? Did they suffer a childhood trauma? Are they getting enough vitamin C? Once she's tapped in, Lenair says she can adjust her patients' energy frequencies to eliminate problems, such as the craving for alcohol. "I touch someone, and I assume everything about them," she says.

Guided imagery is another component of Lenair's treatment. She asks clients to concentrate on a time when they crave a drink. Their reaction to this request, Lenair says, allows her to "enter" their bodies and understand their relationship with alcohol. She then requests that they replace the anxious thought with a calming one, usually a clear sky or gently rolling ocean. "I take them back to before they took their first drink," Lenair says. To describe the client's new relationship with alcohol, she uses an ex-boyfriend analogy: "It's like breaking off a passionate relationship," she says. After years go by, the bond diffuses, she says, and thinking about the ex doesn't inspire the same desire and feelings of loss.

Clients leave clutching a list of herbal remedies and vitamins that Lenair "sees" they're missing or believes will benefit them. The idea is that they'll stay on this prescription, with some tweaking by Lenair, anywhere from six months to the rest of their lives, though strict adherence isn't necessary to stay sober, she says. For Day, the list included gotu kola (an herb believed > to improve circulation, healing, and memory), passion flower, red clover, schisandra berry (an antioxidant fruit-based tincture), vitamin E, calcium, magnesium, zinc. And that's not all: Based on what she divined in Day, Lenair also recommended that Day take up fly-fishing. (Day has yet to call Orvis.)

It's no surprise that Lenair's clients find it difficult to explain what happened during their session. Michelle, a fifty-year-old biochemist who kicked an eight-drink-a-day addiction with Lenair's help, can't even hypothesize about how the treatment works. "I have taught physiology, and for somebody who was addicted to a substance, like me, to all of a sudden not be addicted is a major biochemical change," she says. "Because you've got all these receptors and all of these nerve cells that are craving that substance. And to just say all of those receptors aren't there anymore . . . that's just way too bizarre."

Clients can, however, describe in more concrete terms Lenair's empathy, her compassion, and her refusal to judge. Johnson, the Harvard psychiatrist, says that her ability to remain neutral and simultaneously "feel into the emotional and physical experiences of others" is "exquisitely developed." This quality may play a role in her supposedly exceptional results. Rollin McCraty, PhD, director of research at the Institute of HealthMath, a Boulder Creek, California, think tank that, among other things, studies the physiology of empathy, theorizes that it may actually be the exceptionally steady and powerful heartbeats of healers such as Lenair that stir physiological and behavioral changes. His studies have shown that when a person feels compassion and love, her heart rhythm becomes more even, more regular, and, in his words, more "coherent." Since the heart boasts the body's strongest electromagnetic field, McCraty reasons that a person with a "coherent" heart can coax others' hearts into the same frequency, allowing the less coherent person—in Lenair's case, the alcoholic—to repattern his or her heart rhythms and brain waves to a more peaceful, aware, and, yes, even sober state.

No matter what the explanation, there are addiction experts who worry that Lenair's speedy, no-talking therapy is risky for substance abusers, who, according to one study, are more than twice as likely to seek out alternative therapies than nonaddicts. Devon Jersild, author of *Happy Hours: Alcohol in a Woman's Life* (HarperCollins, 2001), is among the cautious. While she's pleased to see another treatment option for drinkers, she expresses concern, in particular, for female alcoholics. "Women with alcohol problems have other life problems as well," she says, and continued sobriety depends on resolving those issues. It's also critical to diagnose and treat any psychiatric disorders underlying the addiction: Studies show that women who drink heavily are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression and to have endured physical or sexual abuse than their male counterparts.

Mary Day never did talk through the hard truths that she says drove her to drink. Her job is still stressful, and she is still raising her son alone, five years after her husband walked out during the last week of her pregnancy. But Day doesn't really see the point of rehashing those issues: Sitting in her new town house, with her son's cheerful, scribbly art tacked up on the walls, she says that visiting Lenair—which she does every four to six months—has made her happier and healthier. Not only has she quit drinking, she's also shed forty pounds and become a vegetarian. She's even stopped biting her fingernails. "There's no shame. There's no embarrassment. You don't have to talk about it and get into the details. I'm, like, what good will it do? You can't go back and take back what you've done." In addition, says Day, "I feel good after I see Lenair."

Some experts wonder, however, what would happen to clients like Day if, for whatever reason, they could no longer see Lenair. While turning yourself over to a "Higher Power" is the linchpin of Alcoholics Anonymous's twelve-step program, Lenair is not your typical Higher Power. First of all, she's human—and a very busy human. Accessibility, then, becomes a concern: To rely on a nightly AA meeting is one thing; to count on one person who often has a two-month waiting list for appointments could be not only frustrating, but even deadly.

Aside from two follow-up appointments that take place within two weeks of the first treatment, Lenair and Chalfin say they don't routinely keep in touch with formerly alcohol-addicted patients for more than a year (there are too many). Relapses happen. Michelle, the biochemist, felt so confident that her alcoholism was behind her that, on her birthday, she said yes to champagne. "I thought, Well, you know, I can stop on my own now because Rhonda's done this thing," she says. On the contrary. Soon old habits kicked in, and within a couple of months, she was back on Lenair's sofa.

That's not to say, however, that Lenair is courting dependence. She does equip her clients with an emergency-brake technique that allows them to duplicate the visualization aspect of the treatment on their own. One woman I spoke with, who didn't want her name used, tumbled off the wagon and then used the technique successfully to quit again by herself.

A final objection to treatments like Lenair's is that such rapid detox might be dangerous. Margaret Rukstalis, MD, a psychiatrist specializing in the treatment of

addiction at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, reports that 10 percent of alcoholics who experience delirium tremens, an acute withdrawal symptom characterized by hallucinations, tremors, anxiety, and delusions, are at serious risk for death. "We need to view anyone who's dependent on alcohol as a medical emergency," she says. Rukstalis cannot condone any treatment that doesn't include a medically supervised detox, psychological evaluation, and long-term follow-up care (and urges anyone who quits on their own to seek medical care if they do experience shakes or unusual sweating). She dismisses Lenair's claims of success as "lucky" and "anecdotal." Still, Rukstalis acknowledges that the methods that work best are those with meaning for the alcoholic. In other words, when a drinker attempts to quit, believing in her chosen treatment-whether rehab, AA, or Lenair's technique-may just be the most important step toward sobriety.