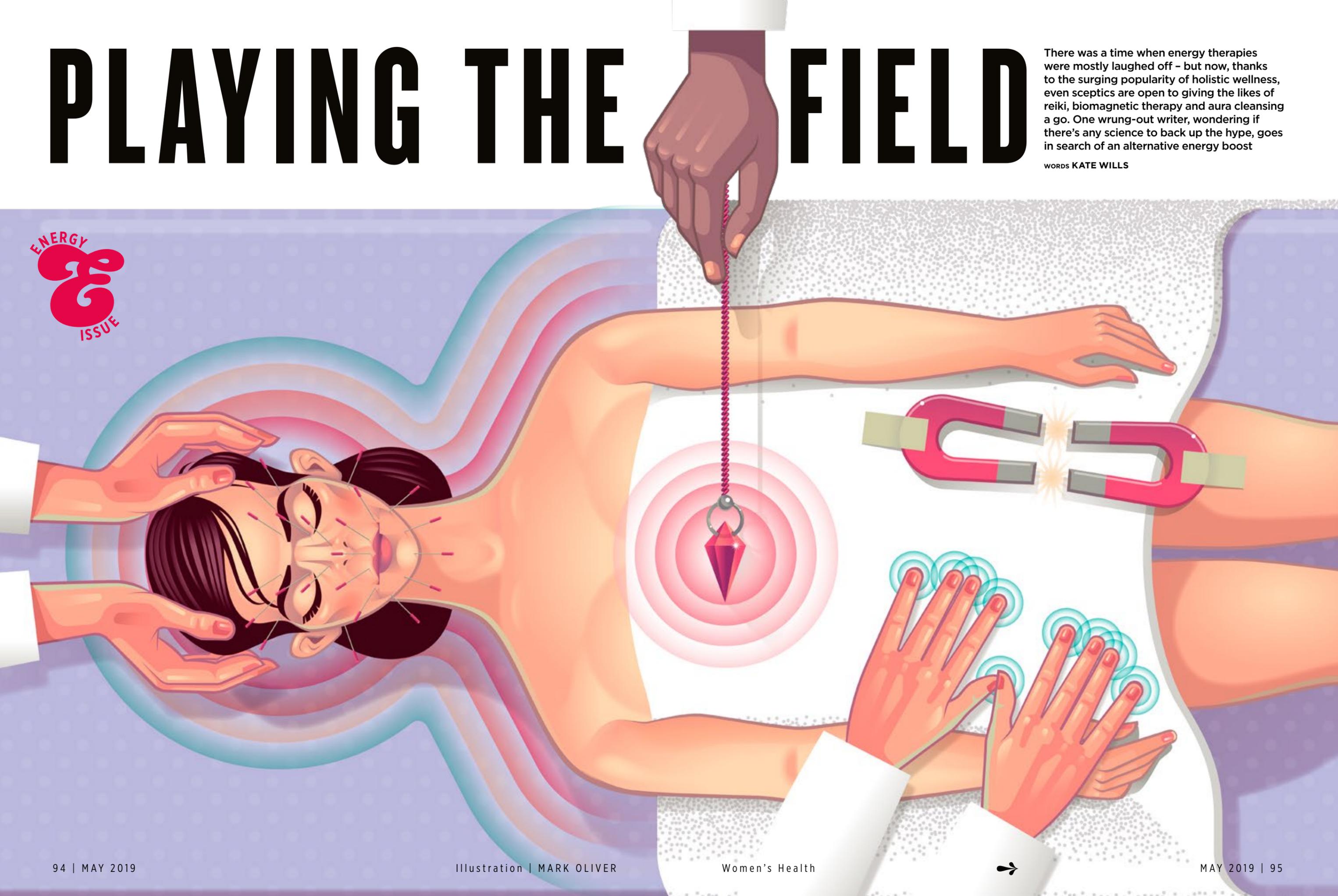


# PLAYING THE FIELD

There was a time when energy therapies were mostly laughed off – but now, thanks to the surging popularity of holistic wellness, even sceptics are open to giving the likes of reiki, biomagnetic therapy and aura cleansing a go. One wrung-out writer, wondering if there's any science to back up the hype, goes in search of an alternative energy boost

WORDS KATE WILLS



# W

andering through the Flatiron district of New York – so synonymous with wellness that it's been dubbed 'athleisure row' – ticking off sleek shopfront after sleek shopfront, you'll soon encounter one identifiable by four consonants decorating the window. While the artfully curated horticultural display and stripped-back decor suggest it's yet another boutique gym or matcha cafe, the contemporary western exterior actually conceals a business rooted in ancient eastern medicine. This is WTHN, an acupuncture studio where regular clients book in just as you would for a file and polish.

## 'Think of energy healing as a way of clearing blockages to help you achieve a state of wellbeing'

Once firmly positioned on the wellness periphery, energy healing is converting to the conventional quicker than you can say 'clear my chakras'. And this energy field extends far beyond the Brooklyn Bridge. Instagram, the unrivalled zeitgeist capturer, shows upwards of 30,000 posts tagged #auracleansing, while fitness brands such as Triyoga and Cloud Twelve are offering qi gong and energy healing treatments like craniosacral therapy alongside vinyasa yoga classes and head massages.

This gravitation towards the alternative hinges on an understanding of energy that goes beyond the number of calories in a sandwich from Pret. 'We all have a physical body and an energetic body, and sometimes your energy flow gets blocked,' says energy healer Sushma Sagar. She had a high-level job in the fashion industry before founding

The Calmery – a Harley Street intelligent energy healing clinic – two years ago. 'You have 72,000 energy channels that converge in seven points called chakras,' she says. 'The energy in the chakra should be flowing clockwise, like water down a plughole, but if the chakra is blocked, the energy can become stuck. Think of energy healing as a way of clearing the blockages to help you achieve your optimum state of wellbeing.'

Ever walked into a room and sensed a bad vibe? Or been on a date and felt the sparks fly? This, according to Sagar, is energy in action. And she isn't surprised if you're sceptical. 'There's something about the word "healing" that can put people on edge. Maybe it isn't clinical enough, maybe it sounds a bit too New Age,' she admits. 'But healing is just doing something that has a positive effect on the body and mind.'

Among the doubters is Professor Tim Caulfield, research director at the University of Alberta's Health Law Institute in Canada, and author of *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?* 'The idea that you have a life force energy that runs through your body and that it can be manipulated is scientifically far-fetched,' he says. 'It's very interesting that energy healing clinics will try to "science up" their claims by talking about physics or vibrations to give them a layer of legitimacy. I've tried many of these therapies and they're relaxing, but any benefits likely come from the placebo effect.' Understood.

However, for me, even the prospect of a placebo lifting my lethargy is appealing. Whether it's down to work stress or the body blow of a breakup, listlessness has become my new normal and my usual pick-me-ups aren't delivering. If self-care has become an effective antidote to these anxious times, could energy treatments ease the dense fog of fatigue? Things are about to go alt.

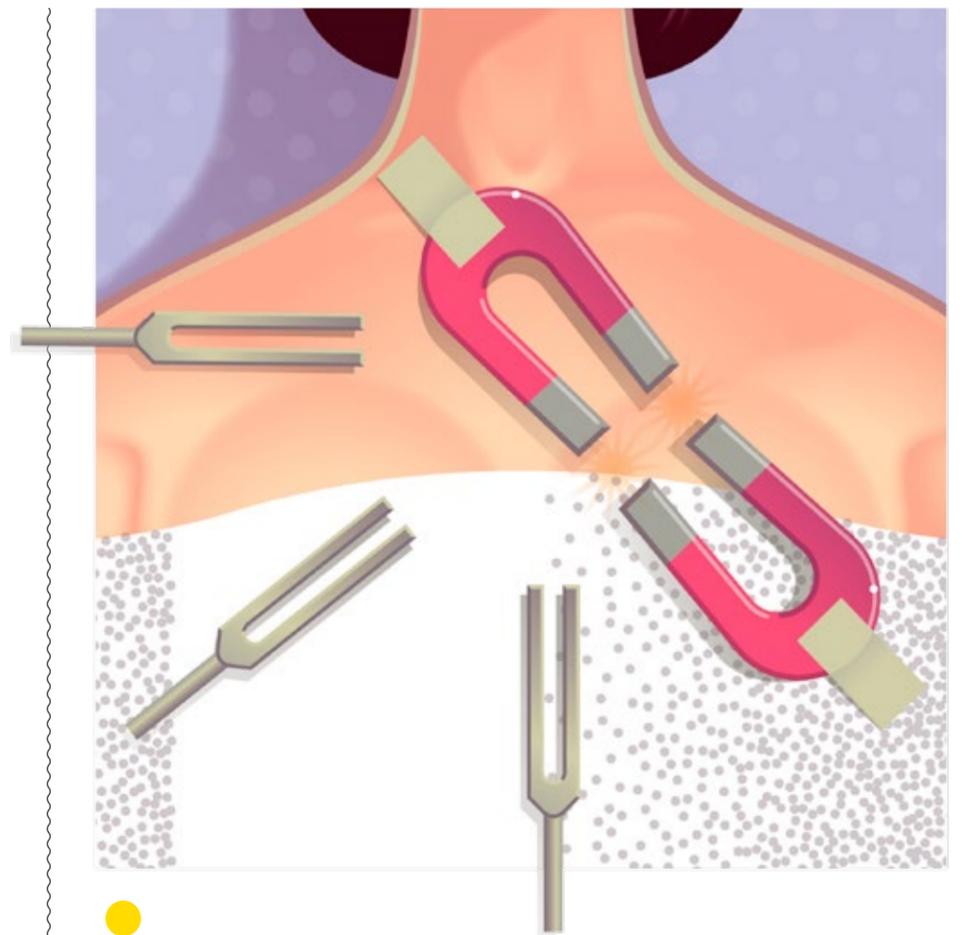


## REIKI

Deriving its name from the Japanese for 'universal life energy', reiki (pronounced ray-key) is rooted in restoring the energy balance in the body. During the course of a session, a practitioner will hover his or her hands above your body in a bid to identify where 'blockages' occur. Some people report feeling heat; others see colours; some have a powerful emotional response. It's the reason people turn to reiki in troubled times. Evidence of its efficacy isn't all anecdotal, either. Several studies have found 'reasonably strong' evidence for reiki being more effective than a placebo at reducing anxiety and pain – music to these burnt-out ears – and all recommend its use as a complementary therapy.

'Imagine a seven-storey house – you have seven chakras – and it's never been cleaned,' says Sagar, when I visit her Harley Street clinic. 'Consider today's treatment as an energetic deep clean.' While I don't love imagining myself as a dusty, messy house, it's a pretty effective – and affecting – image. She begins by placing her warm hands on my face, which feels calming, then we do some visualisation exercises – and I start to feel something. A heavy feeling sits in my throat and vibrations run through my body. Next, Sagar begins to wave a crystal pendulum over the areas where my chakras are – they start around my pelvis and go right up to the crown of my head – to identify any blockages. She finds the first in my root chakra – where my pelvic floor is – which could have been caused by trauma occurring up to the age of seven, she tells me. I'm racking my brains and, while I have a typical litany of childhood trauma (divorced parents and multiple house moves), there's no obvious event that I feel I'm holding on to. But, apparently, that's not the point. 'It doesn't matter what caused it, what's important is that we've got rid of it,' Sagar reassures me. She finds a second blockage in my belly chakra and my mind goes to a recent bout of food poisoning, but I'm told it's more about what the chakra represents. In this case, it's about having fire in my belly, and the motivation to get on with projects – or rather, a lack of it. Truth be told, with everything that's been going on in my personal life, I've felt distracted of late and haven't been able to make much progress with work.

The next morning, after some intense dreams about my childhood, I wake with a renewed sense of purpose. I feel energised, both physically and emotionally – like I could upload all my belongings on eBay, or run a marathon. In the following days, I feel less tired at night and I wake up naturally before my alarm goes off. It doesn't last long, but it's a feeling powerful enough to make me book another session. **A full-body healing treatment is £195 for 90 minutes; [thecalmery.com](http://thecalmery.com)**



## BIOMAGNETIC THERAPY

Developed by Dr Isaac Goiz Durán in 1988, biomagnetic therapy is based on the idea that a wide range of conditions are associated with changes in the pH levels of internal organs. The theory goes that placing pairs of magnets on the body can neutralise the pH level of your organs, making it harder for bacteria, parasites, fungus and viruses to grow. It also suggests that emotions are stored in your body, and that by pairing magnets in the right places, you can release those emotions and boost your energy levels. As for evidence, it's scarce – and let's get real: your pH levels will only become imbalanced as a result of your lungs or kidneys malfunctioning – but a 2017 pilot study of 13 patients with typhoid fever, published in *Acupuncture In Medicine*, found the technique to be effective at improving symptoms. A second found it to be promising for managing diabetes when practised alongside a low-GI diet. But

the medical community remains sceptical about its effectiveness, and as for its influence on energy levels, the jury's out.

I make an appointment with Pema Varela, a biomagnetic therapist who trained with Dr Goiz Durán. After removing my watch (I'm told the metal might interfere with the magnets) and slipping into some flat leather shoes (so it's easier for her to feel my body reacting), I lie on a bed. Varela holds on to my heels while listing parts of my body out loud, telling me my right leg will shorten when she detects an imbalance. Within a few seconds, she's found a 'reservoir' of bacteria between my vagus nerve and my left kidney, which she says could be a lingering TB vaccine from when I was a child, and she places red and black flat magnets on my body with masking tape. During the 50 minutes that follow, she checks over 500 points on my body and places 10 pairs of magnets on me. They're mainly on my right side, which does tend to hold a lot of tension. She

detects elements of the HPV virus – which is news to me – and some inflammation in my eyes, which makes sense – I had an eye problem recently.

When the treatment is over, she places three tuning forks set to different frequencies on my chakras – to 'seal the work' she has done – and my whole body vibrates. I feel so heavy that I can barely get off the bed. 'You'll feel a bit lethargic as your body starts healing itself, but in a few days, you'll have more energy,' she explains. I do feel tired, but no more so than usual, and the promised energy never arrives. But Varela's ability to identify ailments I already know about makes me think she could be on to something with the ones I don't. That said, some 80% of us will have the HPV virus at some point in our lives, and it usually clears up on its own, so her claim that she removed it is nigh on impossible to verify. **£170 for a 90-minute treatment; [biomagnetictherapy.co.uk](http://biomagnetictherapy.co.uk)**



## AURA CLEANSING

The concept of an aura – a sort of emanation from your body – was developed by spiritualists at the end of the 19th century, but the idea of giving it the once over was popularised in the 80s during the New Age movement. Aura cleanser Georgia Coleridge, who runs her own Chelsea-based clinic and recently published *The Chakra Project*, tells me that demand for her services has never been higher.

Arriving at her light-filled townhouse just off the King's Road, I feel frazzled – the result of a toxic cocktail of a rush-hour Tube journey and a stressful work project – which makes me the ideal candidate for Coleridge's services. 'Think of your body as a house and your aura as a garden,' she says. And for the second time this week, I'm picturing my body with walls and windows. She tells me that those with blocked chakras tend to

take on the emotions of others and find it difficult to say no, leading to feelings of lethargy and tiredness. 'Like a room that's not had fresh air.' It sounds familiar.

I lie on a bed under a blanket while Coleridge holds my feet – 'to get a sense of my energy' – and asks me questions about my life. The result is a session that feels like part massage, part therapy. She hovers her hands a few inches above my body, and when she gets to my forehead – the location of my sixth chakra, or third eye – she winces with discomfort and starts to cough. 'You're not seeing things clearly at the moment,' she tells me. She's right, of course, but it's a statement vague enough to ring true for anyone.

There's more old, sludgy energy clogging up my

throat chakra, apparently; I mime taking off a collar, which Coleridge takes from me and throws out of the window. At one point, she gets a message from my ancestors – 'guides who look out for us' – who tell me that I've come to the right place. How convenient.

Afterwards, I do feel energised, and I'm in a much better mood than I was when I arrived. But whether that's because my aura has been cleansed or because I've spent an hour lying down for a chat with someone, I can't be sure. That said, a few days on, I feel a lot more positive. I'm even using some of Coleridge's techniques, such as imagining I'm inside a bubble of good energy before I leave the house, and seeing showers as cleansing me on the inside *and* out.

**£70 for a one-hour treatment;** [georgiacoleridgehealing.com](http://georgiacoleridgehealing.com)



## CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

Based on the theory that the central nervous system has a natural rhythm, craniosacral therapy is designed to manipulate the skull and sacrum (lower back) to remove blockages, enabling cerebrospinal fluid to better flow around the body. It was developed in the 70s as an offshoot of osteopathy, and many craniosacral therapists are also osteopaths by training. Practitioners use it to help with migraines, muscular pain and IBS, relieve stress and boost energy.

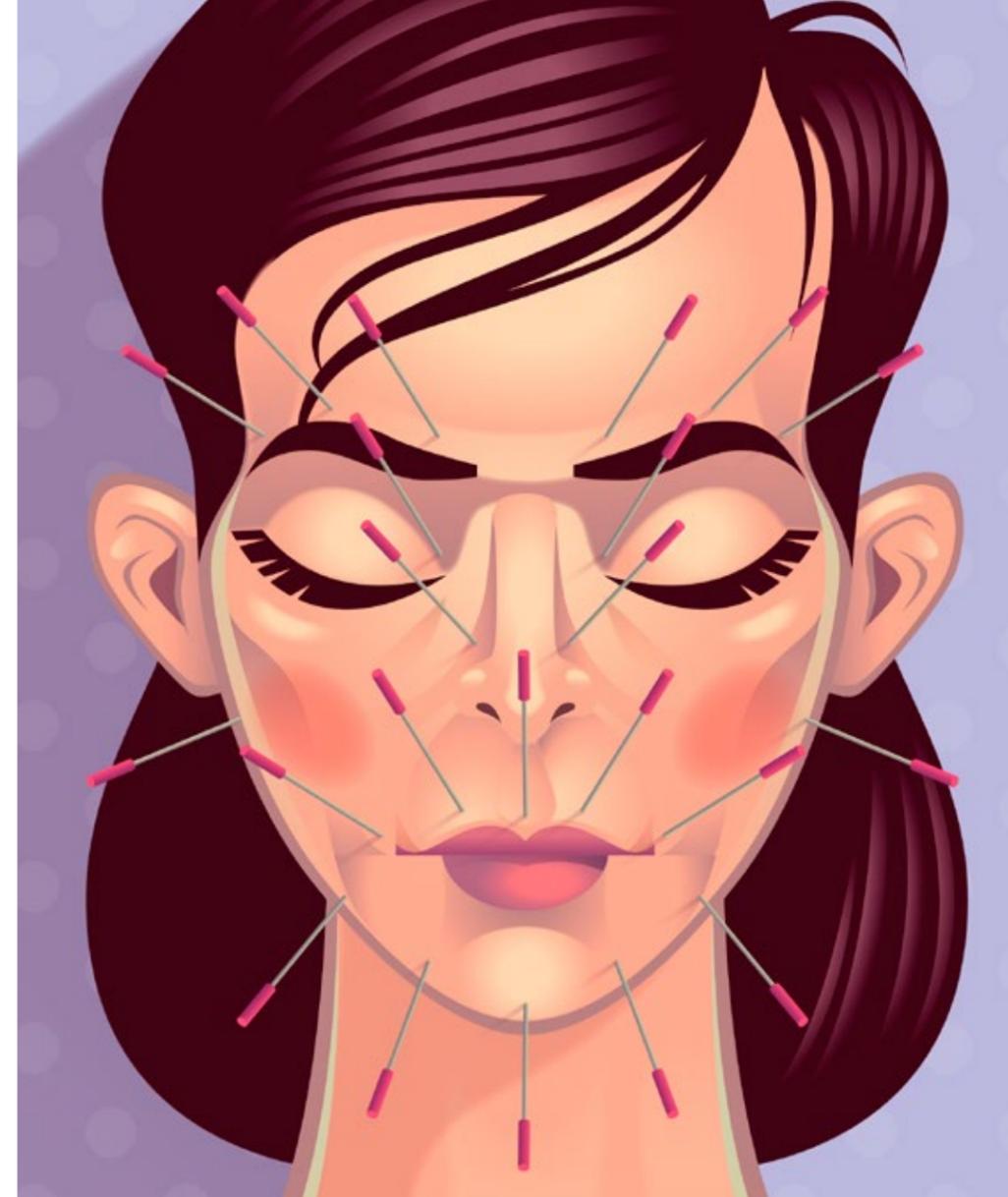
My therapist today is Stephanie James. She's wearing a white lab coat and there's a plastic model of a skull on her desk. The impression this gives is far more medical than any of the other treatments I've had so far. James begins by gently placing her hands on top of my head; she's feeling my body's natural movement and looking for any restrictions. Aware of some twisting down my right side, she asks if I've had any dental treatment recently – I had a root canal in my right side a month ago. She tells me that my right side isn't moving as it should be. It's only when she says this that I realise that when I sprained my ankle back in 2013, it was my right one, and when I get tension in my neck, it's always on the right, too.

Next, I sit on a bed, on top of James' hands. It feels like she's barely moving at all, but I can feel things shifting – almost unlocking – in my pelvis. She explains that the body is a container and, for the contents to work correctly, we need the container to be aligned. When I lie on the bed and she places her hands lightly on my face, it's so relaxing that I almost fall asleep. I feel gutted when our hour is up and I have to drag myself out of her office and out into the world.

Later that day, I'm aware of a loosening in my neck and upper back. Beyond that, I feel a sense of calm and peace that I haven't experienced in months. My train is delayed, my phone dies – aggravations that wash over me like water. It feels remarkable to me that such a light, imperceptible touch could have had such a powerful effect on me. I know I'm a convert when I start bringing the therapy up in random conversations. A massage is great, but for the same price, I've found a treatment that delivers a shot of tranquillity unmatched by anything else I've experienced.

**£60 for a one-hour treatment;** [osteoperformance.co.uk](http://osteoperformance.co.uk)

ICON: MARCO LIVOLSI/AT NOUN PROJECT



## THE ACUPUNCTURE FACIAL

Rooted in ancient Chinese medicine, the aim is to place needles at meridian points in the body to unblock your life force, or 'qi'. Acupuncture is one of the few complementary therapy techniques that's successfully crossed over into mainstream medicine. NICE guidelines recommend considering acupuncture for chronic tension-type headaches and migraines, and it's sometimes available on the NHS for the treatment of various physical and mental health conditions. As for the evidence – it's complicated. While studies have found that acupuncture offers a greater benefit in pain relief than a placebo, the evidence isn't considered to be strong. In an article published in the *BMJ* last year, the medical director

of the British Medical Acupuncture Society, Mike Cummings, blamed the absence of strong evidence on a lack of commercial interest, while others argued the benefits are too small to be attributed to anything other than a placebo effect.

David Peters was working in the film industry when he discovered acupuncture on a trip to China. For the first time since I began this energy quest, I'm nervous. While acupuncture has been around for ages, its ability to turn the human body into a pin cushion has marked this treatment as *other* in my mind. But Peters is passionate about bringing the benefits of acupuncture to more people, and I'm game.

He eases me in with a scalp and shoulder massage, then applies a fragrant serum before inserting the tiny needles into my face. I expect to feel something – a sharp pain, a scratch – but I don't. He

works his way around my face before moving on to my shoulders, hands and feet. Warm sensations flood to the areas where the needles are and I feel overcome by a woozy feeling – the kind that I'm used to following a deep-tissue massage. I'm only vaguely aware of the passing of time and 45 minutes feels like five. Needles removed, my skin is glowing, and the nagging tension I get in my shoulder has disappeared. I feel drowsy, but once my clothes are back on, its given way to a calm, quiet energy far removed from the caffeine-induced kind. If this is what energy healing is supposed to feel like, I'm all in.

**£290 for a 70-minute treatment;** [davidpeterslondon.com](http://davidpeterslondon.com)



### KATE'S VERDICT



Two weeks, five treatments and several references to my body as vessel later, I was half expecting to feel as energetic as an influencer who's just hit 10k followers. While the shift is something subtler, the experience has changed the way I feel about the concept. I feel more attuned to my 'energetic body', and aware of fluctuations from one day to the next. While some of the specifics still feel a bit *out there* for me – speaking to my ancestors is up there – I'd happily swap my monthly massage for craniosacral therapy or reiki; my belief (or lack of it) in every aspect of the premise feels secondary to the way it makes me feel. Traditional medicine will remain my first port of call if I feel unwell, but there's a place for the alternative kind in my schedule and my lunch hour. **WH**