Hurts so good

An unconventional treatment promises to release negative emotional energy—if you can survive the pain. By Annie Tomlin Illustration by Selina Alko

I’m writhing in pain on a massage table, almost in tears. The worst part? I willingly signed up for it.

Welcome to a session of “emotional liposuction,” a treatment created by Lakeview healer Gary Clyman. I was drawn to Clyman’s services because I’d become increasingly irritable, logy and grouchy over the preceding weeks. An acupuncturist and a medical chi kung (qi gong) master, Clyman claims that emotional liposuction sucks out negative feelings stored up in the body, leaving the client mentally and emotionally healthy. I’m not a big alternative-healing type, but Clyman promises results in only one session—so what did I have to lose?

Clyman’s office is thankfully devoid of tinkly-dinkly new age music, and his demeanor is similarly no-nonsense. With a strong, stocky build, glasses and beard, he looks more like Dr. Monroe, the therapist from The Simpsons, than a stereotypical alternative healer. He scoffs when I mention my years in and out of therapy (“And you still don’t feel good, right?”) and doesn’t ask me one question about my childhood or past traumas.

Instead, he explains what he’s about to do to me. Emotional liposuction works, Clyman says, because he uses his own internal energy to pull out eight types of pent-up feelings—abandonment, anger, anguish, bitterness, guilt, fear, rage and sorrow. By pressing different points around the client’s torso, he’s able to tell whether those negative emotions are present. “If you don’t have it, you won’t feel a thing,” he explains. “But it hurts if you do.”

The treatment starts easily and painlessly, with me lying supine as Clyman exhales forcefully. He presses a finger against my collarbone. Nothing. “You don’t have any anguish,” he says.

Next, Clyman presses on my sternum, and a deep, dull ache fills my chest. “That’s abandonment,” he says as he rubs back and forth. He presses about as hard as you’d ring a doorbell, but it feels like an egg beater is whipping my chest into a frothy pain cocktail. I find reprieve when he pokes my left rib cage—no pain, no sorrow—but it was fleeting.

But that earlier pain seems relaxing compared to what comes next. When Clyman moves down to press my abdomen, it feels as though his fingers are daggers. “Push it out,” he instructs. “That’s bitterness—the cause of self-hatred.” It’s like having the wind knocked out of me while having an asthma attack. I am going to die, I think to myself. “This—is intensely—painful,” I squeak out between gasps. Clyman grabs a washcloth and sticks it between my teeth, a bit of over-the-top dramatic flair that nonetheless stops me from clenching my teeth.

At my pathetic, whimpering request, Clyman takes a break from removing my bitterness and moves to other points on my body. No guilt, no fear, no anger. But when he touches one of my lower ribs, a jolt goes through me. Rage. Without exception, this is the worst pain of my life. As he rubs my rib, I fight tears (Clyman says most of his clients cry or scream) and try to remember what life was like before I’d invited this torture upon myself. Clyman alternates between my abdomen and ribcage for the next few minutes. “When it’s all out, you won’t feel a thing,” he says.

He’s right: After about five minutes, the pain is lifted, even though Clyman is exerting the same amount of pressure on my torso. And just like that, I’m done. “It’s normal to feel light-headed,” Clyman explains as I sit up. “But you’ll really feel different in about a week.” When I saw the bruises in the mirror at home, I wondered if the whole experience had just been a show—that the extreme pain just made regular life feel glorious in comparison.

But here’s the funny thing: Weeks after the treatment, I still feel better, lighter. The little annoyances of city life barely bother me. I no longer feel pent-up rage threatening to overflow, and negative thoughts don’t have time to take root. I wouldn’t have expected to get these results, and without personally experiencing them, I probably wouldn’t have believed them. But I know that I’m feeling much more peaceful and content—and now I know what people mean when they say, “No pain, no gain.” $250 for the first session, 3257 N Sheffield Ave at School St (312-446-8218, www.chikung.com).