

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

The Healing Power of Yoga and Song

For cancer patients, more tools to nourish body and soul
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The Fighting Chance team of social workers and clinical advisers includes, from left, Joyce Racanelli, Wendy Hornik, Margaret Bromberg, William DiScipio, Karrie Robinson, and Nancy Greenberg.

C.B. Grubb

Yoga and music, according to practitioners, have immense therapeutic power. While the former is popularly known as a physical exercise in the West, its origins are as a spiritual and

meditative discipline. With music — for both performer and listener — one can be “in the moment,” sometimes to the point of a transcendental experience in which awareness of the material world can melt away.

Fighting Chance, a free cancer counseling and resource center in Sag Harbor, has incorporated both into its arsenal of tools with which patients can live and cope with their illness.

Dr. William DiScipio, a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Amagansett, where he lives, serves as a senior clinical adviser to Fighting Chance. Last month, he told his colleagues at the Amagansett Citizens Advisory Committee about the center’s weekly restorative yoga program, at present held at Yoga Shanti in Sag Harbor and in Westhampton. Starting next month, the program will expand to Mandala Yoga in Amagansett.

“There is mounting evidence that yoga is a very effective method of dealing with a number of different problems, not just cancer but for maintaining health,” said Mr. DiScipio, formerly an associate professor of psychology and assistant professor of urology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. Yoga, he said, appears to improve a person’s ability to fight infections and is effective in circulating lymph around the body, which is important to maintaining immunity and removing toxins and wastes.

But empirical evidence also suggests a value in providing cancer patients an environment in which they are comfortable and relaxed, Dr. DiScipio said. One finding, he said, was that “it was the relaxation people felt after a session that was most critical, almost a moment of peace that they could not acquire any other way.”

The therapeutic yoga program grew out of the desire to provide a comprehensive support system, said Duncan Darrow, Fighting Chance's founder and chairman. "Their need was to have what I would call an affinity group, because their cancer journey had been one of the very memorable, if not traumatic, chapters in their lives," Mr. Darrow said of the roughly 1,200 residents of the five East End towns who are newly diagnosed or experience a recurrence each year.

Yoga Shanti provided a space free of charge for what was initially a monthly class. Instead of "talking about trials and tribulations," Mr. Darrow said, patients perform gentle stretching and breathing exercises "that are doable for cancer patients, especially for those in primary therapy who may not even be ambulatory."

Eight to 10 people are in a typical class, Mr. Darrow said, with more in the summer. The concluding portion of the class, in which participants are at rest and breathing deeply, "is the moment where maybe they can get some peace or tranquillity in their head, which makes a lot of difference."

"One of the goals is to be present, in the moment," Eric Pettigrew, who leads therapeutic classes at Yoga Shanti, said of the sessions, "be fully present, accepting your life right now." Participants' feeling of empowerment and sense of community are palpable, he said, as is their heightened energy level.

Mr. Darrow emphasized that there is no evidence that practicing yoga combats tumor growth. Nonetheless, said Joyce Racanelli, one of four oncology social workers at Fighting Chance, "when you're treating someone holistically, there is a lot written to support that patients live longer and

have a better quality of life.” Yoga, she said, “definitely contributes to a more positive outlook. It’s another modality to help people become able to cope with whatever they’re facing.”

The newest component of the support system is the Fighting Chance Choir, conceived when one of Dr. Di-Scipio’s patients, beset with anxiety over her illness, mentioned her lifelong appreciation for music and a desire to sing. The doctor suggested a choir, and today, “we have 12 professionally polished choir singers,” he said, a blended group of cancer survivors, caregivers, and “some really good voices” from the Old Whalers Church in Sag Harbor. The choir performed at the Fighting Chance Christmas party and the holiday concert at the church in December, and is to sing at the organization’s annual gala in June and, in December, the Lighting of the Vines at Wolffer Estate in Saga-ponack.

“Music heals,” Dr. DiScipio said, “and we think of it as another alternative therapy.” The choir, Mr. Darrow said, is “not what we’re really in the business of doing, but if it lifts their spirits and builds their self-worth and they want to do it in the office one week per month, let’s give it a try.”

About the Author

Christopher Walsh

Reporter

631-324-0002 ext. 118 cwalsh@ehstar.com