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Chronically Ill Patients Turn to Yoga for Relief

By CAROL E. LEE

JACK WATERS credits yoga with saving his life four years ago. Riding the subway in Paris, he began experiencing chest pain. He knew that signaled a heart attack because he'd had two already, side effects of an H.I.V. medicine that raised his cholesterol. He needed to get to a hospital, but first he wanted to do a yoga pose.

"I had to get out and sit down and use the bench and do an inversion so that I would be able to walk somewhere to get help," he said. He started to take deep, slow breaths to maximize his oxygen intake and did a shoulder stand to increase his circulation. Then he found a taxi and went to a hospital.

Mr. Waters, 51, a filmmaker, learned these techniques in a yoga class for people with H.I.V. and AIDS. The weekly session at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Manhattan teaches exercises that can ease side effects like headaches or fatigue and aid bodily functions like digestion. "It pretty much saved my life," Mr. Waters said.

People with chronic illnesses from AIDS and cancer to osteoporosis and Crohn's disease are increasingly turning to yoga classes that single out their specific ailments. Often it is something their doctors recommend for the stress-relieving benefits of both exercise and meditation. But many patients find that the sessions, which make them feel more comfortable, also lessen some of their symptoms and the side effects of their medications. And because students exercise alongside others with their same medical problem, the classes also provide emotional support.

"I had always been exercising, but I had never done anything that focuses on the mind and the body," said Cynthia Mencher, a breast cancer survivor. Five years ago Ms. Mencher, 69, joined a yoga class at the Integrative Medicine Service at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan while recovering from her illness. "That gave me back a sense of reinhabiting my body."

Two lumpectomies and radiation therapy had made the left side of her upper body very stiff, but the shoulder poses and twists she practiced in yoga increased her flexibility. Ms. Mencher said she never felt self-conscious if she struggled to do a pose because her class consisted mostly of other cancer patients and survivors. The yoga also relieved some of her mental anguish, she said.

Teresa Kennedy, a former executive at MTV Networks who has Crohn's disease, found that yoga classes relieved her gastrointestinal symptoms to the extent that she was inspired to open her own studio, Ta Yoga House in Harlem. "I don't get G.I. symptoms," she said. "I hardly get stomach aches."

Yoga classes for people with specific illnesses are typically smaller than regular yoga classes - sometimes accommodating no more than 8 to 10 people - and they are usually slower-paced. Postures, which are on the gentler end of the difficulty spectrum, are often done with blankets and bolsters so participants can experience the physical benefits of poses while exerting a minimum of muscular strength and energy.

"We're trying to restore the body and give it juice," said James Murphy, the president of Iyengar Yoga Association of Greater New York, who teaches the free H.I.V. and AIDS class at the institute. "Even if they've been lying in bed for three weeks with pneumonia," he said, "they can start with some poses that can open up their chest."

Medical professionals have embraced meditative practices like yoga in managing illnesses. Studies have shown that yoga can, among other things, reduce fatigue in people with multiple sclerosis and lower anxiety in patients with cancer, heart disease or hypertension. In a recent preliminary study at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, people with chronic insomnia who practiced yoga daily said that they were sleeping significantly better and for longer periods.

Some skeptics say the benefits are no greater than what patients would get from praying, taking a warm bath or any other stress-relieving practice.

"It gives some people peace of mind or makes them feel better," said Dr. Robert Baratz, a dentist and a physician in Braintree, Mass., who is the president of the National Council Against Health Fraud. "But there's no medical or plausible mechanism by which it affects the disease process."

There is a danger, he said, in giving patients the impression that a practice like yoga could somehow cure their illness.

Advocates of yoga therapy agree that it does not cure or treat disease. But they say it helps patients better tolerate their symptoms and lessens the anxiety that an illness creates. By boosting flexibility, increasing the heart rate and calming the mind, yoga helps people relax, said Jo Sgammato, an administrative manager of the Integral Yoga Institute in Manhattan. "Why not take advantage of these practices and healing modalities that make a difference in the quality of life while you're go through chemotherapy and radiation?" Ms. Sgammato said.

The students themselves often say that one of the things they like best about illness-specific yoga classes is that the instructors understand their physical limitations. "In a yoga class at a health club they might be doing 25 different postures," said Jackie Herbach, a massage therapist and yoga instructor at Memorial Sloan-Kettering's Integrative Medicine Service. "In a class here you might be doing 8 or 10."

Classes also avoid any postures that could be harmful - by overstretching the joints, for example - and sometimes include uncommon props.

"We begin seated in a chair," said Cynthia Mathis, who runs Unity Yoga in Mountainside, N.J., and who offers a weekly class for people with osteoporosis, "then do movements, raising arms over the head, stretching to the side." The class also does poses while standing against a wall. "The premise is that you're returning the spine to its natural alignment," she said.

Teachers like Ms. Herbach take a delicate approach to students with physical illnesses. "They could have low blood counts, so you have to be cautious as an instructor to transition slowly," she said of the students with cancer, "and if you're assisting them, you have to be careful because they're more prone to bruising."

Some instructors inquire privately about their students' medical history. For a person with heart disease, the teacher might want to know if the student has high blood pressure or has recently had heart surgery.

Inevitably a class of students with a common illness creates a community, especially if it includes a therapy component similar to the support group meetings held after yoga classes at Beth Israel Hospital's Center for Cardiac and Pulmonary Health in Manhattan. "The bonds that form are remarkable," said Deborah Matza, a registered nurse and yoga instructor who runs one of the groups.

The possibility of meeting other people like himself was what drew Peter Griffin, 46, who is H.I.V. positive, to the free yoga class for people with H.I.V. and AIDS at the Integral Yoga Institute. But the poses have been more beneficial than he expected; he says they have helped relieve the numbness in his feet, a side effect of the medication.

The class was started 20 years ago, when AIDS patients often did not live very long. "The feeling of health is there, the optimism and hope are there," said Lee Pleva, the instructor. "There's a real sense of personal connection and caring."