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Cutting Edge

Yoga therapy makes bid for medical respect.

Inside: Platinum



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On The Cutting Edge

Yoga therapy makes bid for medical respect.



Left: Many hospitals now offer both community and therapeutic yoga classes, such as this one at Providence Park Hospital Assarian Cancer Center, Novi.

Below: "We have had a program of yoga therapy for four years," says William Beaumont Hospital cardiologist Dr. Pamela Marcovitz.



Judith Doner Berne
Special to the Jewish News

The ancient practice of yoga is slowly wending its way into modern medicine.

"Yoga therapy — tailoring a custom yoga regimen to treat a client's specific psychological and physical health concerns — is increasing in popularity and acceptance," according to a recent Wayne State University study.

Although healthy backs have long been a focus of yoga classes, yoga therapy for conditions as diverse as addiction, brain injury, heart problems, multiple sclerosis and cancer is coming into play.

A movement to train yoga teachers to become yoga therapists is gaining traction. Indeed, the mission of the International Association of Yoga Therapists is "to establish yoga as a recognized and respected therapy."

At the same time, yoga studios are becoming de rigueur at hospitals, where classes may be prescribed for patients and offered to the community.

Meanwhile, the medical and yoga communities await results of the year-long experiment under way on a cancer treatment floor of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York.

There, designer Donna Karan's charitable foundation has donated \$850,000 "to turn a hospital into a testing ground for a trendy, medically controversial notion: that yoga, meditation and aromatherapy can enhance regimens of chemotherapy and radiation," according to a story published last year in the *New York Times*.

"I refer a double-digit number of patients each week to yoga therapy," says Dr. Pamela Marcovitz, M.D., medical director of the Ministrelli Women's Heart Center at William Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak.

"There have been a lot of studies proving that yoga and similar techniques improve cardiovascular outcomes," says Marcovitz, a University of Michigan-educated cardiologist who lives in Ann

Arbor. "It's the wave of the future," she says.

At Yoga Therapy of Michigan in West Bloomfield, Suzanna Ran is one of the growing number of Metro Detroit-based yoga therapists who is both training new therapists and offering treatments specific to clients' ailments.

"You always have to have some medical person involved," cautions Ran, who has completed 650 hours of yoga therapy beyond her training as a yoga teacher and



"We're a yoga-based program," says Beverly Price, who helps people explore their relationship to food.

has a degree in exercise physiology from U-M.

"My back was so sore I couldn't walk," says Shiela Cuscutis of Farmington Hills, one of Ran's clients. "I had done some physical therapy and that didn't do anything."

"I noted her stiffness, her weakness, her imbalance through watching, touching and talking with her," says Ran of West Bloomfield. "I slowly took her through a series that was designed specifically for her."

"I'm amazed at how much better I feel," Cuscutis says. "Now I can get down on the floor and get up. I have a lot more stamina. It keeps improving."

Proven Evidence

The medical community is coming around to yoga because doctors are seeing clear evidence of what works, says Sarah Fink, co-founder with Yoga Shelter owner Steve Feldman of YogaMedics in Farmington Hills.

Still, insurance lags behind. By docu-

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menting their work through detailed patient studies, “we’re trying to get more and more insurers to cover what we do,” says Fink, a native Detroit who holds a master’s degree in public health from U-M.

“I fell in love with yoga in college,” says Fink, a Commerce Township resident whose doctor dad took her to her first yoga class. “I was working in health care. And it just came to me that this is what health care needs.”

Guided by a medical advisory board of physicians, psychologists, therapists and featuring 15 trained yoga therapists, YogaMedics combines medical evidence and protocol with yoga philosophy and practice.

“In our western world, we won’t do anything without a study,” says Julie Levinson, who runs the Vita yoga program at Henry Ford Hospital, West Bloomfield (HFH), just one of the many local hospitals that now feature wellness centers.

Levinson of West Bloomfield leads therapeutic yoga classes directed at patients with cardiac problems, cancer, multiple sclerosis, spinal issues or who are recovering from surgery. Classes to combat depression, alleviate menopause and ease sleep are in development.

“It’s about helping these patients make the mind/body connection,” says Levinson, who also holds community yoga classes. “It’s beyond the yoga postures. It’s about visualizations, deep relaxations, guided imagery.”

Despite the growing commitment by hospitals to therapeutic yoga, many doctors remain unconvinced.

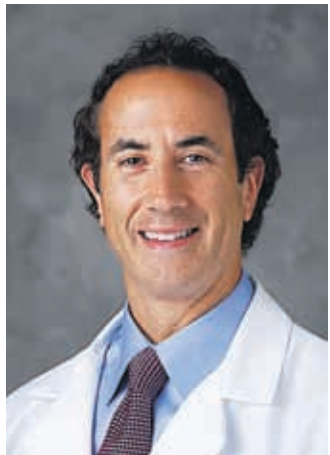
“Physicians should take the blinders down,” says HFH Dr. Michael Seidman, M.D., a nationally recognized ear and facial nerve surgeon and a skull-based and acoustic neuroma surgeon who is medical director of the HFH wellness center.

Approaching doctors “one at a time, I do my best to get them to understand the importance of utilizing our services,” says the West Bloomfield resident who also is considered an expert on the molecular basis of aging.

“There is compelling medical evidence that yoga can help,” says Seidman, whose undergraduate degree in human nutrition and medical degree are from U-M. “But it’s a hard sell.”

Some of that evidence has been collected in *Yoga As Medicine* by Dr. Timothy McCall. “As someone who has been an M.D. for over 20 years, I can tell you that yoga is simply the most powerful system of overall health and well-being I have ever seen,” McCall writes.

The book details medical evidence for 18 conditions, including alcoholism, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, insom-



Left: “Physicians should take the blinders down. Studies show many results of yoga therapy are beneficial,” says Dr. Michael Seidman, medical director of Henry Ford Hospital West Bloomfield’s wellness center. Middle: “I feel like the Tin Man,” says former dance teacher Barbara Fink, who uses yoga therapy to cope with multiple sclerosis.” Right: “My students are a gift,” says yoga therapy teacher Mindy Eisenberg.



nia, neurological and neuromuscular diseases and menopausal and menstrual problems.

Making Headway

“It’s such a new field,” Levinson says. “It will take time to make headway with doctors. We’re on the cutting edge of something. We’re the innovators.”

“It’s up and coming,” agrees Dr. William Leutcher, M.D., a Southfield neurologist who prescribes yoga therapy for MS patients (see related story). But he also predicts: “I don’t know that this will be covered by most insurances for a long time.”

“It’s well established that both premenopausal and postmenopausal women who are physically active have a 30 to 40 percent lower risk of developing breast cancer compared to sedentary women,” says Dr. Laura Freedman, M.D., a radiation oncologist at Providence Hospital in Southfield and Novi.

She cites an M.D. Anderson Medical Center study in which half of the 60 women undergoing radiation for breast cancer attended yoga class during treatment. Those who participated in the yoga sessions reported less fatigue and daytime sleepiness and better overall health, the Huntington Woods resident reports.

“The stretching involved in yoga may also help women retain good mobility after surgery,” says Freedman, who graduated from U-M medical school.

“Science moves slowly,” says Dr. Arthur Efros, M.D., a Southfield internist who regularly practices yoga. “Everything starts out not being paid for. Doctors are wisely the gatekeepers. They need to see the studies.”

“What determines the quality of your life is not your heart, not your liver. It’s your mobility,” says Efros, whose medical degree is from WSU. Yoga helps you with strength, flexibility and balance, which are especially important starting in late

middle age.

“A large percentage of the elderly fall,” says Efros, who recommends yoga and yoga therapy, especially to his older patients. “It becomes not just the quality but the safety of your life.”

Lynn Medow of Yoga by Design leads five “gentle yoga” classes a week at Karma Yoga in Bloomfield Township that can usher people into or back to regular yoga.

She also takes her yoga therapy practice on the road, traveling to clients’ homes to help them recover from illness or injury or combat the signs of aging. “I always want to have a medical person involved.”

Medow, who spent 22 years employed at JARC in Farmington Hills, brings that experience to her studies of yogic philosophy and the universal principles of alignment. She works with patients with MS, Parkinson’s disease, cancer, and those referred by psychologists.

Insurance, she says, does cover clients who have been injured in auto accidents. “A doctor wanted to bring me into his practice,” the Bloomfield Township resident says, but the insurance issue made it impractical.

Unlike many yoga therapy programs, several insurance plans do cover eating disorder treatment at Inner Door in Royal Oak, a licensed addiction clinic built around Beverly Price’s Reconnect With Food program.

“We’re a yoga-based program,” says Price, a nutritionist, exercise physiologist and yoga teacher from Huntington Woods. “Many of our insurance contracts are carved out that way.” The staff includes a psychiatrist, psychologist, social workers, counselors, a chef, dietician and yoga specialists.

“I get calls from all over the country asking how to integrate yoga into eating disorder therapy,” Price says. “It’s not just about the poses. The philosophy is in everything we do.” □

What is Yoga Therapy (YT)?

A qualified yoga therapist guides individuals on a healing path and road to wellness.

YT is a multidimensional approach tailored to the whole person and utilizes the disciplines of structural and therapeutic yoga, breathing, meditation and relaxation techniques. Lifestyle factors are taken into account and recommendations are made.

YT empowers individuals to feel comfortable in their own bodies and requires active participation in their therapeutic plan.

YT compliments medical treatment and is not a substitute for clinical care.

— courtesy of Lynn Medow and Mindy Eisenberg

For more information about yoga therapy from those interviewed:

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www.yogaspiritwellness.com
(248) 417-5985
- Sarah Fink
www.yogamedics.net
(248) 225-0275
- Julie Levinson
www.henryfordwestbloomfield.com/vita
(248) 325-3870
- Lynn Medow
www.yogabydesign.us
(248) 939-1367
- Beverly Price
www.reconnectwithfood.com
(248) 336-2868
- Suzanna Ran
www.yogatherapy-om.com
(248) 507-4008

MS Patients Seek Healing, Camaraderie

Judith Doner Berne

Special to the Jewish News

Mindy Eisenberg asks the seven women seated in chairs against a wall at Karma Yoga in Bloomfield Township to close their eyes, breathe deeply and “think of something that has beauty for you.”

“Select a part of your body that needs healing and imagine some way to heal this area,” suggests the Franklin Village wife and mother of two.

As you may have guessed, this is no ordinary yoga class. Five students are in various stages of multiple sclerosis, the chronic neurological disease that affects the central nervous system. One has fibromyalgia and asthma; another suffers from chronic pain.

The class progresses to a series of sitting yoga postures, then others on the floor and against the wall.

“The best pose is legs up the wall,” Eisenberg says.

“MS is so fatiguing. We use the poses in different ways, depending on where the discomfort or pain is,” she says. “We work for the release.”

This is one of three yoga therapy classes she leads each week, one of which meets at Congregation Shaarey Zedek B'nai Israel Center in West Bloomfield.

Each focuses on a yogic concept or coping technique for different symptoms and daily demands of MS, Eisenberg says. “Therapeutic yoga complements medical care and does not replace it or ‘fix’ MS. Yoga helps individuals live with MS.

“One size does not fit all,” she cautions. “Each individual and class is different and unpredictable. A yoga therapy practice must be designed based on specific student’s symptoms, abilities and needs. We are celebrating the individual as well as the community support in the class.”

Eisenberg, who calls her enterprise Yoga Spirit & Wellness, was driven to specialize because of the 1998 death of her mother, Linda Weingarten, after “a long, downhill battle with primary progressive MS.

“Ironically, my students are a gift,” she says. “It’s so gratifying to hear them at the end of class say that they feel good or better, that they are able to apply yogic concepts at home and that these

classes supply a network and support system.”

“Aside from the camaraderie, they get these ‘ah-ha’ moments,” says Marla Horwitz, a Birmingham resident who assists Eisenberg. “They don’t want to be a burden to anyone and MS is a burdensome disease. So this class also is time they can devote to themselves.”

“From a psychological perspective, they need to feel they’re doing something for themselves,” says Dr. William Leutcher, M.D., a Southfield neurologist who wrote out the first yoga therapy prescription that Eisenberg has ever received from a physician.

“It’s reasonably often that I will offer some sort of muscle therapy for MS patients,” says Leutcher, a West Bloomfield resident who is a WSU associate professor of neurology.

“It helps them to adjust to the disability and can help with depression and anxiety,” he says.

“It’s great fun and does a lot of things,” says participant Barbara Fink, who taught hundreds of Metro Detroit students to dance over her 55-year career, primarily at Miss Barbara’s Dance Centre, which she has now sold.

For her, Eisenberg’s class “makes you slow down and the stretching is just wonderful because I feel like the Tin Man now.”

“Every ‘body’ can generally benefit from a yoga pose or technique with modifications,” says Eisenberg.

“We are looking for students to feel that just coming to class is a sanctuary, to feel the beauty within and to know that yoga is more than a pose and they can embody it physically and energetically,” she says.

“No matter how you feel when you come in, you always are better when you leave,” says Margo Rubens from West Bloomfield. “I don’t miss this class – ever.” □

Scholarships are available to take therapeutic yoga, supported through the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. A wine tasting, including a silent auction and live entertainment, is scheduled for 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 14, at the Birmingham Athletic Club. Attire is “jeans and jewels.” RSVP by Nov. 10 to diane@ringresults.com or (248) 553-5732.

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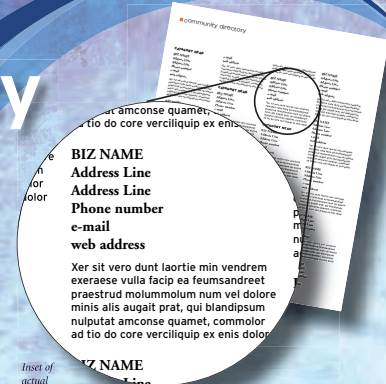
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