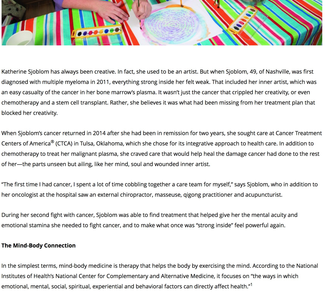
INSPIRATION

Mind Your Mind

Mind-body therapies like dance and art can soothe the soul. They might help heal the body, too.

By MATT ALDERTON



Katherine Sjoblom has always been creative. In fact, she used to be an artist. But when Sjoblom, 49, of Nashville, was first diagnosed with multiple myeloma in 2011, everything strong inside her felt weak. That included her inner artist, which was an easy casualty of the cancer in her bone marrow's plasma. It wasn't just the cancer that crippled her creativity, or even chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant. Rather, she believes it was what had been missing from her treatment plan that blocked her creativity.

When Sjoblom's cancer returned in 2014 after she had been in remission for two years, she sought care at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which she chose for its integrative approach to health care. In addition to chemotherapy to treat her malignant plasma, she craved care that would help heal the damage cancer had done to the rest of her—the parts unseen but ailing, like her mind, soul and wounded inner artist.

"The first time I had cancer, I spent a lot of time cobbling together a care team for myself," says Sjoblom, who in addition to her oncologist at the hospital saw an external chiropractor, masseuse, qigong practitioner and acupuncturist.

During her second fight with cancer, Sjoblom was able to find treatment that helped give her the mental acuity and emotional stamina she needed to fight cancer, and to make what once was "strong inside" feel powerful again.

The Mind-Body Connection

In the simplest terms, mind-body medicine is therapy that helps the body by exercising the mind. According to the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, it focuses on "the ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual, experiential and behavioral factors can directly affect health."[1]

"Mind-body medicine is based on an area of medicine called psychoneuroimmunology, which studies the central nervous system, the mind and the immune system, and how all of those relate together," explains Tanis Taylor, a licensed marriage and family therapist who works in the Mind-Body Medicine Department at CTCA® Southwestern Regional Medical Center (Southwestern). "It's all about helping patients identify the mind as the powerful resource it is by understanding how our thoughts affect our feelings, our behavior and what's going on in our body."

Mind-body medicine can refer to a number of therapies, including psychotherapy, yoga, meditation and hypnosis, as well as options like art, music and dance/movement therapies. Such therapies are based on the premise that creativity stimulates expression and communication, inspiring self-awareness that can catalyze positive behavior changes to benefit physical health.

Although more research on mind-body medicine is needed, there is some initial evidence to suggest it works. In 2010, for instance, researchers from Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine and Harvard School of Public Health reviewed more than 100 existing studies on the benefits of the arts—including music, visual arts, dance and writing—and concluded "there are clear indications that artistic engagement has significantly positive effects on health."[2]

"There are studies that explore how unaddressed anger may be linked to heart disease, and how being unable to manage stress and worry impacts how your immune system functions," says Taylor, who says psychological improvements in stress and anxiety have been shown to yield physiological improvements in heart rate and blood pressure. "So, there's evidence to suggest there are benefits to mind-body medicine—and creative expression, in particular."

Armed with Art

One of Sjoblom's favorite mind-body programs is Art for the Soul, which was established in 2014 by Taylor. "I'm currently doing maintenance chemo once a month and go out of my way to schedule my trips so I'll be there for the classes because I love them so much," says Sjoblom, who is in remission for the second time.

Art for the Soul meets every Friday morning for 90 minutes. Each session begins with guided imagery and relaxation exercises to strip away participants' stress and prime their minds for the creative process. Subsequently, participants engage in an art project whose goal is helping them confront and manage unresolved feelings that might be standing in the way of their recovery.

"One of my favorite quotes is from Georgia O'Keeffe, who said, 'I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way—things I had no words for,'" says Taylor. "That's our mission with this program."

Projects vary but have included painting, collage, art journaling, weaving, Zentangle, which is repetitive, meditative doodling and coloring in the adult coloring books that are so popular now. Some days the class is boisterous and social; other days it's quiet and intense. Regardless of mood or medium, the 90-minute journey is fruitful for those who embark on it, Taylor says.

"We have one patient who is a very high-energy lady," Taylor says. "She was working on a collage and in the middle of it she stopped and said of her painting, 'Wow! It's really chaotic here. And look, there's a path up here to this place that's almost like a sanctuary.' It wasn't intentional—she wasn't aware of it when she was creating it—but in looking at her art and reflecting on it she realized: Life at that moment was really chaotic, and she needed to build a path to a place that felt more peaceful."

For Sjoblom, the product of art isn't clarity, exactly. Rather, it's catharsis. "I don't do it to make something beautiful or to process feelings of grief. It's not that black and white. I do it because it's an hour and a half where I can leave the left side of my brain, go to the right side of my brain and just get whatever is in me out," she says. "You don't realize it, but there's this heaviness that surrounds you all the time, and art for me just lightens that load. It lifts my soul, and I believe that is beneficial."

Body of Knowledge

At CTCA at Midwestern Regional Medical Center in Zion, Illinois, mind-body therapist Alexandria Callahan helps patients realize many of the same outcomes people in art classes experience—but using their bodies as canvases with dance/movement therapy (DMT).

"For many patients, there's a disconnect between the head and the body. If you ask them how they're feeling, they can't really describe it," says Callahan, a licensed clinical professional counselor who has a master's degree in dance/movement therapy and counseling. "With dance/movement therapy, we use cues from the body to make the mind aware of how you're feeling so you can process the trauma you're going through."

DMT shouldn't be confused with structured dance classes. The goal isn't learning to salsa; rather, it's learning to listen to your body through improvisational movement.

"Something I do with patients a lot is turn on music, then have them close their eyes, take a couple of deep breaths and connect with their body by doing whatever it wants to do," Callahan explains. "It's shutting off the mind and letting the body lead, which can be really beautiful and tension-relieving, making it an excellent form of self-care."

Indeed, a 2013 study from the American Dance Therapy Association states: "Results suggest that DMT and dance are effective for increasing quality of life and decreasing clinical symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Positive effects were also found on the increase of subjective well-being, positive mood, affect and body image."[3]

Although anyone can benefit, DMT can be especially powerful for patients suffering from reproductive cancers such as endometrial, breast and prostate cancers. "It's not uncommon for someone to come in and say, 'I've had a double mastectomy and a hysterectomy—I'm missing all the parts that define me as a woman—so I'm having a difficult time connecting with my body,'" Callahan says. "Analyzing how they move their bodies—what's different in their movement now versus when they had all those parts—can help them reconnect with themselves, which helps them regain confidence."

Even people who lack mobility, like those in wheelchairs and hospital beds, can benefit from DMT. "There's so much you can learn about your body just by focusing on your breathing," Callahan continues.

One Body, Many Minds

Mind-body medicine is about introspection and self-discovery. But that doesn't mean it's a solo endeavor. As with conventional treatment, caring for a single body takes many minds, including physicians and caregivers, all of whom have important roles to play.

"We get a lot of referrals from our doctors; they're very open to mind-body care," Taylor says. "If they see a patient who's struggling with anxiety or depression, or has unresolved issues that are impacting their treatment, they'll ask us to get involved and help."

Therapists can be helpful to physicians. If one of her DMT patients is struggling with body issues, for instance, Callahan can relay the need for extra sensitivity to his or her physicians.

As for caregivers, participation in mind-body therapies can be beneficial both to themselves and their loved one. Taylor, for example, says caregivers often come to Art for the Soul alone when their loved one is sleeping or in treatment. "You can feel them exhale as they're sitting there working on a project," she says. "We'll hear them say a lot, 'Wow, I really needed that today.' And they did, because if you're not taking care of yourself, you're not going to be able to take care of your loved one."

In the case of couples, especially, Callahan often engages caregivers in patients' therapy directly. "I'll have the patient move and their partner observe them, because I may be able to understand what they're struggling with in a relationship more clearly by seeing them move," she says. "Another intervention I use is for patients who have intimacy issues. I'll have the patient and their partner stand back-to-back and breathe together, or face-to-face and put their hands on each other's hearts. Their bodies and breaths fall into a rhythm, which helps them reconnect on a physical level and understand that they can be intimate even if they're not able to have a sexual relationship right now."

Whether it involves art or dance, therapy by yourself or with a caregiver, mind-body medicine alone won't make you better. But it can help make you feel better, according to Sjoblom, and that's a good start.

"For me, going through cancer treatment is like walking into a snowstorm. I put my head down and I walk forward. When I look up again, I'm someplace else. But while I'm going through it it's a big white mess," she concludes. "I don't know why mind-body therapy helps me, but I know that when I'm walking along and look up a few weeks later, I feel better having done it."

No case is typical. You should not expect to experience these results.

[1] **NIH Fact Sheet: Mind-Body Medicine Practices in Complementary and Alternative Medicine,** https://report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/Pdfs/MindBodyMedicinePracticesinComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine(NCCAM).pdf

[2] **The Connection Between Art, Healing, and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature by Heather L. Stuckey, DEd and Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH,** http://www.kansasarttherapy.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/art_therapy-article-11-29-2010-published.pdf

[3] http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0062801/

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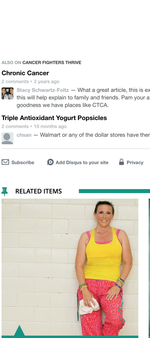

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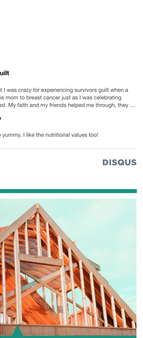

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