

Meditation, yoga helpful for breast cancer patients: study

VANCOUVER – Meditation and gentle yoga have been proven to be more effective than group therapy in helping breast cancer survivors cope with the stress and anxiety that often follows treatment, according to a recent study from cancer researchers in Alberta and B.C.

The study, the largest trial of its kind, followed 271 breast cancer survivors in Alberta and B.C.

Findings show participants who used ‘mindfulness-based’ therapy, which includes meditation and yoga, were more likely than group therapy participants to develop positive coping strategies, such as acceptance, and less likely to use unhelpful strategies, such as worry and avoidance.

“More women than ever before are surviving their active treatments for breast cancer but continue to have high levels of stress resulting from their illness,” says Dr. Linda Carlson, a clinical psychologist with CancerControl Alberta at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary, Professor in the Department of Oncology at the University of Calgary, and the study’s lead author.

“Our study shows mindfulness-based therapy is better than group therapy for decreasing symptoms of stress and for improving overall quality of life and social support. As participants gradually increased their exposure to feared thoughts and feelings during meditation practice, the feared stimuli lost much of their power.”

Study co-author Joanne Stephen, clinician-scientist with the Provincial Psychosocial Oncology Program of the BC Cancer Agency, says cancer survivors who used meditation and yoga often displayed “a sense of heightened control, calm, peace and serenity, even in the face of the many uncontrollable elements of cancer.”

The Tom Baker Cancer Centre offers an eight-week, mindfulness-based therapy program, which includes weekly, 90-minute group instruction and a six-hour meditation retreat. Participants are also encouraged to meditate and do yoga at home every day for 45 minutes.

Dr. Carlson says findings also show group therapy and mindfulness-based therapy are both effective in helping women deal with the physical and biological changes that can occur during breast cancer and related treatments.

“These are complementary therapies,” says Dr. Carlson, who also holds the Enbridge Research Chair in Psychosocial Oncology at the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Medicine.

“Support group therapy focuses on encouraging emotional expression and fostering mutual support. Mindfulness-based therapy focuses on becoming aware of all incoming thoughts and feelings and accepting them, but not attaching or reacting to them. While overall the mindfulness-based cancer recovery program had better psychosocial outcomes, they could also be used together, helping breast cancer survivors put the illness behind them, manage the changes in their bodies, and move forward with their lives.”

“The BC Cancer Agency Mindfulness Program was a lifeline during a time of great personal challenges,” said Vancouver resident, Diana Gage. “Learning the mindfulness techniques helped me through pain and fear during treatment, and has become a valuable tool in my everyday life as I move beyond my cancer experience.”

The study was recently published in the [Journal of Clinical Oncology](#).

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The BC Cancer Agency, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority, is committed to reducing the incidence of cancer, reducing the mortality from cancer, and improving the quality of life of those living with cancer. It provides a comprehensive cancer control program for the people of British Columbia by working with community partners to deliver a range of oncology services, including prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment, research, education, supportive care, rehabilitation and palliative care. www.bccancer.ca.

CancerControl Alberta reduces the impact of cancer on all Albertans and provides expert care and support for patients from their first symptom to survivorship. Our goal is to be a leader in cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment, survivorship and palliative care, all on a foundation of world-class research.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.9 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.