Stressed by Cancer and Staying Home? This Website Can Help.

Wellspring Global provides free content from stress management and wellness experts at more than a dozen cancer centers.

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The new website Wellspring Global brings stress management and wellness into your home for free. It does so via evidence-based programs and events created by health care professionals from academic medical centers and tailored to the needs of people with cancer.

The site was born out of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing quarantines and increased stress and fear that it brought to the cancer community. But it was actually conceived a year and a half ago.

The goal: to make it easier for people with cancer to take advantage of techniques and practices that can dramatically improve quality of life. “There is fabulous science that demonstrates that non-pharmacological but evidenced-based interventions—including exercise, meditation, breathing practices, stress reduction techniques and qi gong—are capable of helping individuals with cancer control anxiety, depression, fear, fatigue, nausea and pain,” says oncologist Gregory Mears, MD, a professor of medicine at Columbia University Irving Medical Center and Wellspring Global’s medical director. “It’s a tool kit that is applicable to many of the problems that cancer patients face on a daily basis.”

Yet too few people take advantage of these services, even though they are available at major cancer centers. One reason is that oncology teams, focused on treatment, may not recommend them to patients, says Mears. But even when they are offered, many people with cancer don’t want to schedule additional appointments. “If you think about it,” says Mears, “nobody wants to come back to a cancer hospital to do yoga therapy.”

So Mears, working with journalist and yoga expert Leigh Leibel, MSc, clinical director of Yoga Therapy for Cancer at Irving, decided to build a website to deliver these therapies at a distance. They started to enlist colleagues.

Then the pandemic arrived and the need got much, much bigger. “We were pondering it, and COVID-19 came along and changed our lives and the lives of our patients,” says Mears. “People with cancer already face great anxiety, fear and depression based on the diagnosis and the

daunting nature of many treatments, and now suddenly, they can't get their treatments, and they are scared."

A Pandemic Brings New Fears

"Even under normal circumstances, being immunocompromised is terrifying," says Betsy Glosik, chair of the patient advocate committee at the Society for Integrative Oncology. She's a survivor; she knows.

Diagnosed with melanoma in 2003 and breast cancer in 2007,Glosik turned to exercise to help her recover ("I would get an infusion, take a nap and go to the gym") and since then has added yoga and mindfulness meditation to help her maintain wellness.Glosik, now healthy, seesCOVID-19 adding a new layer of anxiety for people with cancer that she didn't have to handle. "They're bombarded from the media, and the descriptions we're getting are very graphic," she says. "It adds to anxiety and depression." She has worked with Leibel to help identify potential contributors for Wellspring content.

Leibel, too, has seen anxieties increase dramatically in the cancer patients she works with. She had been teaching yoga one-on-one, but now those sessions are canceled. "I work with a lot of older cancer patients in my yoga practice," she says. "I was working with them several times a week. Now they are all alone in their apartments, telling my they are scared, hungry. They are afraid to push the button on the elevator. It's heart-wrenching to see anxiety ramp up every day."

A Healing Community of Experts

So Wellspring Global was launched. "The idea is to have a resource where people who are quarantined or isolated can turn to a community where they can learn techniques to manage stress and anxiety and promote wellness," says Leibel. "These include mindfulness, breathing practices to self-regulate the nervous system, meditations, simple yoga practices you can do in a chair or in bed or holding onto a bed, exercise and eating well at home."

The practices are geared to the needs and concerns of people with cancer. "Everyone who is contributing is from an academic medical center or hospital," says Leibel. "These people work every day with cancer patients. They are highly trained in how to present these practices in a safe way." For example, some people with cancer have issues with their skeletal bones—especially if there has been metastasis to the bone. "There are certain postures that you shouldn't make," says Leibel. "We are all very aware of that."

The collaborative project launched with 47 clinicians from 15 medical centers in the United States and Canada, including Columbia University Medical Center, MD Anderson Cancer Center (Houston), Roswell Park Cancer Center (Buffalo), University of Maryland School of Medicine (Baltimore), University of Cincinnati Health, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill and others.

At launch, the site featured podcasts, Zoom events and recorded video classes on yoga,

acupressure, qi gong, sleep and nutrition, exercise and breathing. There's a podcast on happiness, a live Zoom event on an anticancer lifestyle, scheduled live dial-in mindfulness meditation sessions, interactive healing circles led by an oncology nurse, chair yoga classes, Spanish-language yoga and a sound bath meditation led by a licensed music therapist. The site is in English and Spanish.

"People ask me, 'Where do I even start? Where can I begin? I want something that is simple and accessible,'" says Leibel. "Now I can tell them, 'Start here.'"

For the Wellspring Global website, click here.

To learn more about coronavirus and cancer, click here.

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