



NOURISHING THE SPIRIT

Mind-body practices like meditation have become an important part of modern cancer care

by JULIA WILLIAMS

Cancer and its treatment are notoriously difficult, with symptoms and side effects that challenge patients physically and emotionally. Treatments like chemotherapy and radiation attack the cancer, but cannot relieve its secondary conditions like insomnia, pain and anxiety — in fact, while treatments are vital, they can often make these secondary conditions worse.

Increasingly, scientific evidence shows that non-medical tactics such as spiritual practices and mindfulness meditation can help manage negative symptoms and side effects. Over the last 20 years, oncologists have begun to incorporate such techniques into complete cancer treatment programs. >



The Power of Prayer

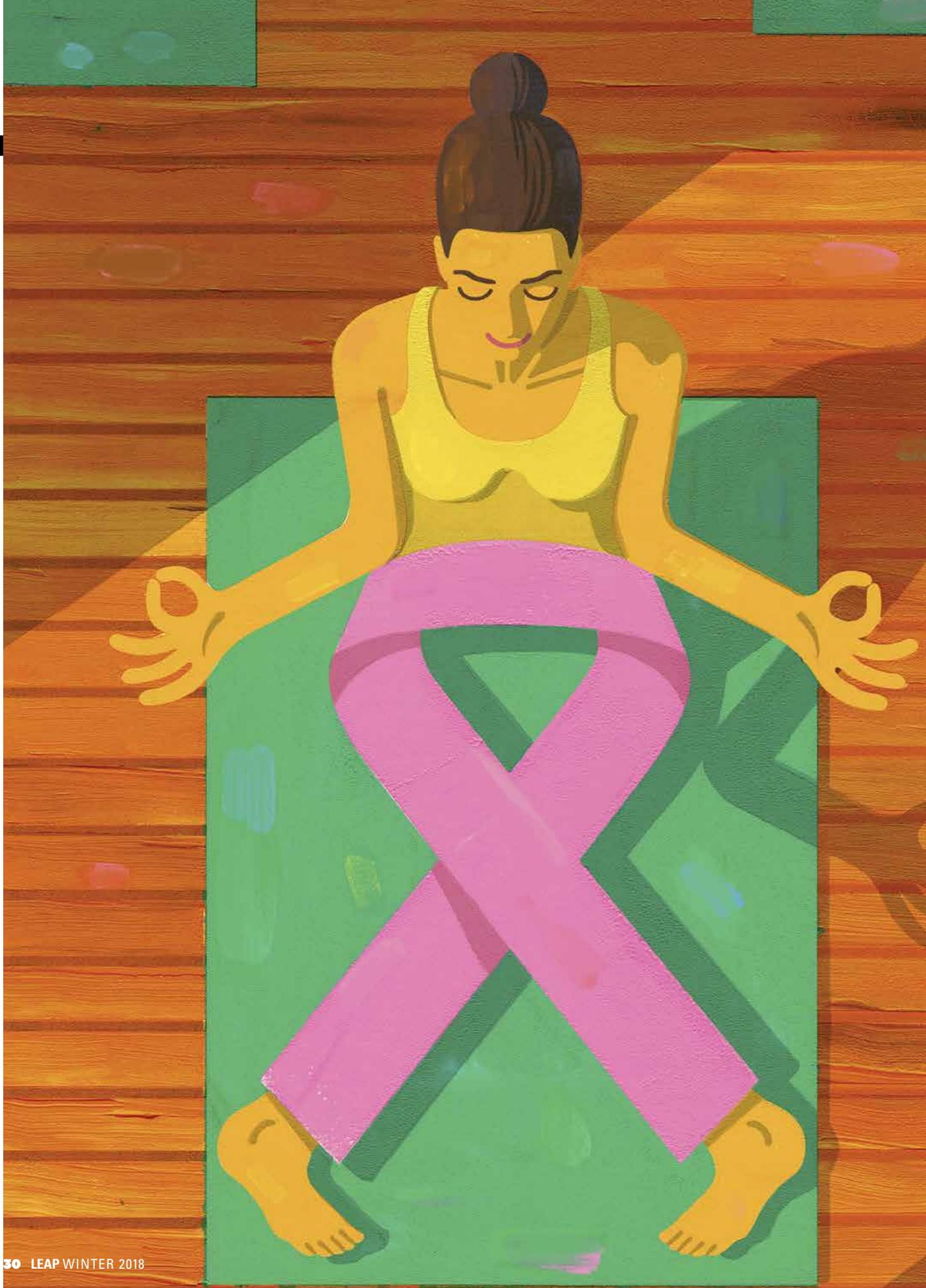
“LONG BEFORE modern medicine, people were using meditation and prayer,” says Dr. Shane Sinclair. He’s an associate professor and cancer care research professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary, and he studies the art and science of compassion and spirituality and its effect on people with serious illnesses. He says spiritual practices can help patients manage distress and retain a sense of meaning before, during and after cancer treatment.

In fact, many cancer patients turn to prayer and meditation instinctively, whether or not they belong to an organized religion, and whether or not these practices are part of their official treatment program. Sinclair says a study showed 52 per cent of cancer patients at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre pray at least once a week — a statistic that surprised even him. “A lot of patients use these practices more than physicians may know,” Sinclair says. “Patients want it, and patients use it.”

A 2015 study that investigated the effect of religion and spirituality on physical health in cancer patients in the U.S. concluded that these practices are associated with better patient-reported

physical health. Moreover, they should be considered an important component of comprehensive cancer care — not because they cure the illness, but because they improve quality of life. Prayer and meditation can have physical and cognitive effects, reducing feelings of anxiety and distress while increasing resilience. Spiritual practices can give patients hope while connecting them to supportive communities, both of which can enhance a patient’s focus on self-care. “They can be thought of as the longest-standing healing practices,” Sinclair says. “They can bring an incredible amount of comfort to people.”

Despite their history, spiritual and meditative practices have not always been part of modern oncology. “The biomedical model has been king for decades,” Sinclair says. However, he believes the mounting scientific evidence for meditation and prayer is opening minds. Word of mouth has also been effective: the more oncologists and practitioners see the positive results of such practices, the more open they become to incorporating them. In fact, Sinclair says many practitioners engage in spiritual practices to manage their own stress. **LEAP**



The Science of Mindfulness

MINDFULNESS IS

a simple idea, according to Dr. Linda Carlson. It's just being present, awake and aware in the moment – but that's easier said than done. "Our natural state is not always that mindful," Carlson says, explaining that we tend to dwell on the past or imagine the future, and the stress and difficulty of a cancer diagnosis distracts us even more.

Carlson is a clinical psychologist and director of research in the Department of Psychosocial Resources at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary and holds the Alberta Cancer Foundation's Enbridge Chair in psychosocial oncology. She's been developing and guiding mindfulness meditation programs for cancer patients for more than 20 years.

"Being diagnosed with cancer is all about uncertainty, loss of control, change in routines, unpredictability, existential crisis," she says. The treatment process often causes pain, nausea and insomnia, and survivors live with the fear of recurrence. Carlson says all of these symptoms and side effects are amenable to treatment with mindfulness, which helps improve focus, regulates energy levels and helps people deal with uncertainty.

Carlson's interest in yoga and meditation dates back to her student days in the 1990s, when a Buddhist monk classmate at McGill University introduced her to these practices. Carlson became inspired by the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American scientist, writer, professor and founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR. "Mindfulness is a formal practice where you set aside time in your day, but it's

also a way of being," Carlson says. "It's an attitude or a fundamental approach to life."

Later, as a post-doctoral fellow at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in 1998, Carlson and three colleagues – Michael Specca, Eileen Goodey and Maureen Angen – developed a seven-week mindfulness meditation program, which they used to investigate the effect of this practice on the stress levels and moods of cancer patients.

Carlson wasn't surprised to learn that the program measurably reduced participants' stress symptoms, but the magnitude of the changes was beyond what she had anticipated. "We saw huge improvements in people's level of anger, anxiety, physical stress symptoms and fatigue," she says.

In subsequent studies, Carlson found mindfulness practices improved immune functioning and sleep. Other studies, not specific to cancer patients, have found meditation can affect neurological changes, lower salivary cortisol levels, improve immune functioning and reduce blood pressure. "There's no question that there's changes in the brain," Carlson says. "We see changes in the nervous system, stress hormones, immune system and changes at the level of the cell."

Carlson's original meditation program has become a nine-week program that combines intensive training in mindfulness practices with gentle hatha yoga. Tom Baker Cancer Centre patients can choose from three programs, offered on different days, three

times a year, and the sessions can accommodate 15 to 20 participants. Carlson also offers a weekly drop-in group for program "graduates" who want to continue their practice. Recently, the Tom Baker Cancer Centre also trained facilitators from Wellspring, a non-profit organization that supports cancer patients and survivors, so that it, too, can begin offering mindfulness meditation programming.



Mindfulness was once considered a complementary or alternative therapy, but that's changed. Carlson says her program has had a wait list for 20 years, is included in the new patient orientation package at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre and is recommended by oncologists. Similar programs are offered across the world. None of this surprises Carlson, who has long understood the connection between mindfulness and physical well-being. "Everything that happens in your mind happens in your body," she says. **LEAP**



LINDA AUSTIN

AUSTIN'S MINDFULNESS RESOURCES

Mindful.org

A website with resources, advice and information about mindfulness practice.

MindShift app

Mindfulness tools focused on reducing anxiety.
(Android, iOS)

Louise Ha Affirmations app

Guided relaxation and positive affirmations.
(Android, iOS)

Headspace Guided Meditation app

Mindfulness coaching and guided meditation.
(Android, iOS)

Breethe app

Guided meditation.
(Android, iOS)

PHOTO JARED SYCH

A Patient's Perspective

WHEN LINDA AUSTIN decided to take a mindfulness meditation program through the Tom Baker Cancer Centre, she was afraid she'd be made to sit in a circle and say "om." She tried it anyway, and is now one of the program's most enthusiastic advocates.

The course taught Austin breathing techniques, body awareness, sensory awareness, being present, and relaxation through meditation and yoga. By the time the program ended in the summer of 2017, Austin hadn't once said "om"—but she had experienced physical, cognitive, emotional and mental benefits. "I could see the difference in how I was coping with my everyday life," Austin says.

Austin was diagnosed with myelodysplasia (a type of leukemia that had claimed her father's life) in 2013. She went through chemotherapy treatment, which

weakened her, and a stem cell transplant, which confined her to the hospital for five months with infections and complications. She was exhausted and reluctant to sign up for the weekly meditation program, which seemed like yet another medical appointment. Now she's glad her care team at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre kept urging her to enroll.

A program graduate, Austin engages in several seven-to-10-minute meditation breaks during the day to rejuvenate and focus. She says learning mindfulness has made a huge difference to her life. "I'm more at peace with my cancer journey than I have ever been," she says. "I honestly believe I'm going to be okay now because not only have I accepted my new normal, I have learned to live with my new normal, which is a big difference." **LEAP**

YOGA CLASSES FOR CANCER PATIENTS

If you're seeking a mind-body practice, several yoga classes in Alberta are designed for cancer patients, survivors and support persons.

YOGA THRIVE Various Locations in Alberta

A research-based 12-week therapeutic program for cancer survivors and their support persons, Yoga Thrive originated in Calgary in the early 2000s and has trained more than 100 instructors across North America. The program is a modified version of hatha yoga that addresses conditions common to cancer survivors, such as pain, stress and fatigue. You can find Yoga Thrive classes in multiple locations in Calgary and across the province. There's also a Yoga Thrive for Youth program for pediatric cancer patients and their siblings. ucalgary.ca/healthandwellness-lab/programs/yoga-thrive

IYENGAR YOGA CENTRE Edmonton

This centre offers inclusive programs that can cater to students who are going through cancer treatment and help to address side effects like fatigue and anxiety. familyoga.ca

YOGA FOR MEN Wellspring Edmonton

A gentle yoga program for cancer patients and survivors, this men's program incorporates meditation and is designed to improve relaxation, flexibility and balance. wellspring.ca