

Moving Through Fear

For some patients, fear of conventional treatment can be debilitating; relief is available through an integrative approach that offers both conventional treatment and complementary therapies to manage side effects.

By Laurie Wertich

MICHELINA RIMER wasn't too scared initially when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer—she figured she would have a radical hysterectomy and that would be the end of it. But when doctors found two lymph nodes with cancer in them, and she discovered that she would need chemotherapy and radiation to kill any remaining cancer cells that may have spread, she got nervous. Michelina's online attempts to find out more information about her treatment only made matters worse: "It's pretty scary what you read there about chemo and radiation," she says.

That's when the real fear began to creep in. The more Michelina read about chemotherapy and radiation, the less she wanted to experience it. "It was really scary for me," she says. "So that's when I started looking into alternative options. I looked into a couple of different centers outside of Connecticut—into Arizona, even into Mexico—and that's the route I was going to take. But then my doctors really scared me when they said, 'If you go that route, there's no guarantee that it won't come back or spread; and if it does spread, it could be worse to treat later.'"

Difficult Choices

Michelina had a tough decision to make. She was fearful of undergoing conventional treatment yet also fearful of not undergoing the treatment. Furthermore, her family was terrified as well and not thrilled about the alternative treatment

Michelina Rimer and Max.

The HeartMath Program

Michelina used guided imagery in conjunction with HeartMath,[®] a computerized program that monitors heart rate variability and gives the user visual feedback in the form of three different colors to indicate her level of “coherence,” a physical state in which the heart and the brain are working in sync. While touching a sensor, the user attempts to generate positive emotions—sometimes with the help of guided imagery or visualization. Michelina did this by imagining herself in St. Maarten. With practice and feedback, the user can train herself to use these positive emotions to move toward high coherence (indicated by the green light Michelina described), in turn sending signals to the brain to reduce stress and improve brain function, hormonal balance, and immune response.



options she was considering. “When something like this hits you, it hits the whole family,” she says. “Cancer becomes a family matter.”

Born in Italy, Michelina and her family came to the United States in 1973 and have remained fiercely close. As she tried to make decisions about her care, she was very aware that her choices would have a profound effect on her entire family. “Although my husband would have supported me in whatever decision I made, he really did not want me to go to Arizona or Mexico for alternative treatments,” Michelina says.

Hoping to learn more about options that might alleviate her fear, Michelina spent weeks talking to doctors and researching treatment choices. But when she would ask about taking supplements to help her body manage the chemo and the radiation, she says, doctors would invariably tell her that that wasn’t an option. “They said, ‘No, we don’t want you to take any vitamins or supplements at all. It might affect the treatment.’ That scared me,” she says.

Finding Balance

Michelina’s fear of the side effects of conventional treatment kept her looking for a different approach. “I wanted to find a place that would help me with both [complementary and conventional treatments] so that I wouldn’t be scared about the side effects,” she says. “That’s when I found this place and realized that I could possibly get the best of both worlds.”

The best of both worlds came together at Cancer Treatment Centers of America[®] (CTCA) at Eastern Regional Medical Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, Michelina found the balance she was looking for. Though the doctors at CTCA didn’t sugar-coat her prognosis—they agreed that she would need chemotherapy and radiation—they could offer her a different way of receiving that treatment. They were not just going to take care of the cancer; they were going to take care of her. “My fear of trying chemo and radiation subsided because CTCA blends the best of both worlds,” Michelina says.

Just how do they do that? It’s called an integrative approach—blending conven-

tional treatment with nutrition, naturopathic medicine, mind-body medicine, spiritual support, and other complementary therapies to treat the whole person, not just the disease, and to provide patients with the best chance of fighting cancer while maintaining the best quality of life.

Tools and Options: Mind-Body Medicine

Among the clinicians and the experts assigned to Michelina’s care team at CTCA was a mind-body therapist. Ongoing research continues to uncover an unmistakable link between the mind and the body. “We know from research and experience that when we can manage stress more effectively, it actually has a link to our immune function,” says Carol Roth, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and mind-body therapist at CTCA.

Mind-Body medicine honors that link between the mind and emotions and the body and immune system. It is based on a specialty called psychoneuroim-



Michelina focused on images of the Caribbean—a favorite vacation spot—as part of her mind-body therapy.

munology (PNI), which is the study of the interactions between psychological processes and the body's nervous and immune systems. Mind-body therapists are licensed mental health professionals who use a variety of techniques to promote health, including relaxation therapy, guided imagery, counseling, meditation, reiki, and more.

Mind-body medicine is quickly becoming a cornerstone of cancer treatment. "The idea is to support, educate, and empower patients and caregivers," says Roth. "If you just feel like you're lost out there in a universe of information and medical choices, there's going to be some fear. What I see is that once people have a plan, they begin to feel less anxious."

mind-body), and mind-body tools are introduced in the context of the relationship with the therapist. Having and using these relationships is a big part of what helps reduce fear for people. It's easier to face fear when one doesn't feel alone."

Fear is Universal

Roth says that it's natural for cancer patients to have fear. In fact, she finds that there are four common fears among most cancer patients: fear of death, fear of the unknown, fear of separation from loved ones, and fear of becoming dependent on others. "The absolute bottom-line fear that people have is that they're going to die," she says. "I think it's important—that it has to be absolutely normalized—because the desire to survive is the most

primary, instinctual thing that all organisms have."

Roth works with patients first to acknowledge and honor those fears and then to find ways to work through them. "There's a lot of emphasis throughout the whole field about being positive to fight the cancer, and that's well and good," she says, "but I think being authentic is very valuable. There are many things that patients may need to talk about."

Roth helps her patients understand that their fears are normal, that they are not alone. She says it's a fine balance: she needs to allow them to experience their natural fears but also help them move through the fears so that they can take care of themselves. "We don't want fears to hold people back," she says. "We want to help them explore and make the decisions they need to make to get what is right for them."

Linda Sullivan, another LCSW and mind-body therapist at CTCA, echoes Roth's sentiments. "Cancer patients have so many decisions they have to make, and sometimes if they get too anxious and too overwhelmed by their fears, their mind gets very cloudy and they are no longer good advocates for themselves. They can no longer make good decisions for themselves because they are shut down by the fear and anxiety they may be experiencing."

Facing Your Fear

Sullivan, Roth, and other mind-body therapists use many different techniques to help move their patients through fear and into empowerment. In addition to counseling, they may use guided imagery, relaxation techniques, meditation, laughter therapy, support groups, and reiki. Reiki is an ancient form of healing that uses a gentle hands-on touch to balance the body's energy, strengthen its ability to heal, reduce stress and physical discomfort, and increase peace of mind.

Sullivan uses counseling in conjunction with reiki to help her patients relax and move through what she calls “stuck energy.” “Mind-body treatments that we offer, such as reiki, are geared at eliciting the relaxation response; and the more patients have an opportunity to experience a deep state of relaxation, the more effectively their immune system is going to work,” she says.

Roth sees part of her role as a mind-body therapist as that of teacher. “We can do a lot to help patients in the moment,” she says, “but we want to build on giving them a skill set they can live with.” She tries to provide patients with tools they can use at home, such as relaxation or guided-imagery CDs.

Guided imagery is one critical and effective way to move through fear. Mi-



Carol Roth, LCSW, mind-body therapist at CTCA, was an integral member of Michelina's care team.

Putting Fear Behind You

“I'm pleasantly surprised that I'm this far along and I'm not in worse shape,” Michelina says. “I never thought in a million years that after six treatments of chemotherapy and 28 radiation treatments I'd have a full head of hair and be okay. For all the horror stories that I was reading online of what people went through, this is just not what I was expecting.”

Michelina was fortunate enough to be able to take 12 weeks off from her job as a district manager for Health Markets so that she could undergo treatment. Her job usually keeps her on the go and traveling a lot, and she looks forward to returning to her full and busy life. She and her husband generally travel to St. Maarten in December, but her treatment schedule postponed the trip this year. She hopes to go in April for her birthday. She also hopes that there is another trip to Italy, her homeland, in her near future, and she is enjoying spending time with the new puppy she and her husband recently brought home. Having worked through her fears with the help of mind-body therapy and having found peace of mind, Michelina is now ready to embrace a full and joyful future. **CFThrive**

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

chelina worked with her mind-body medicine therapists and a pastor to learn how to use guided imagery to help her relax during treatments (see “HeartMath Program” sidebar). “It's a matter of what you're thinking and the way you're thinking and how you put yourself there,” she says. She describes being hooked up to a computer that uses color scores to show how quickly an individual can get to a “happy place”—green is serene, red is stressed, and blue is somewhere in the middle.

Michelina chose the Caribbean island of St. Maarten, a place she has visited for years, as her happy place. “I went to St. Maarten, and I was green,” she says. “He [the pastor] couldn't believe how quickly I was green, and he said, ‘You can be in a good place. Just put yourself there.’ So, every time I go into chemo or radiation, I start thinking about being there instead of being where I am.”