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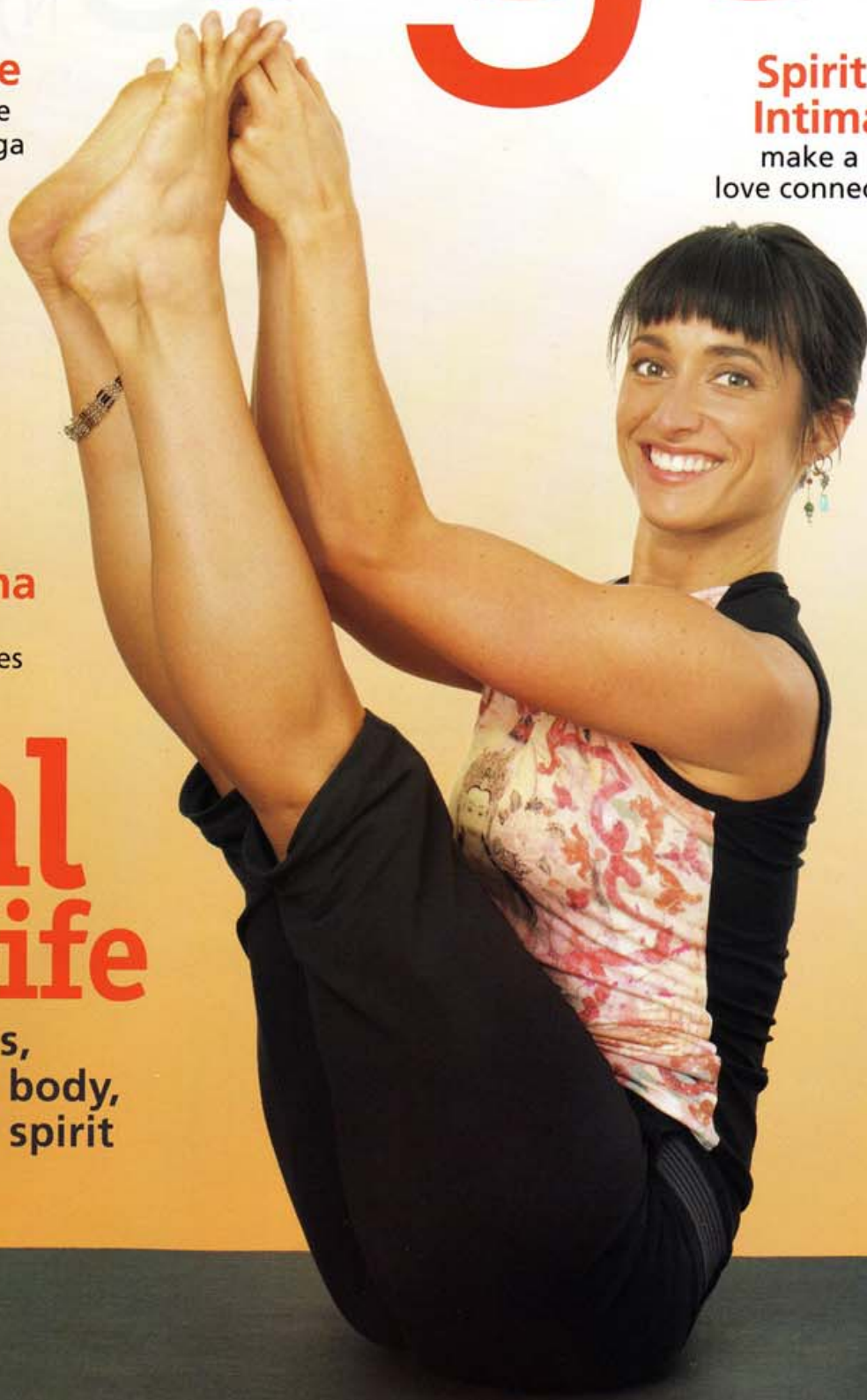
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A Patient Practice

People living with cancer find hope, joy, support, and strength in practice and in each other

by Teri Wingender with contributions by Fran Becker, LCSW, Elizabeth Manfredo, MS, RD, and Deanna Xistris, APRN



When Joan O'Brien was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995 at age 53 (the last day of her classes at law school), she underwent a mastectomy, along with chemo and radiation, at the Stamford Hospital's Carl and Dorothy Bennett Cancer Center in Stamford, Connecticut. She also instinctively sought alternative healing therapies to support her recovery. Her surgeon happened to know Dr. Bernie Siegel, whose best-selling book, *Love Medicine*, helped awaken a generation of Americans to the power of love, intention, and spirituality in healing.

Seeking support

"Dr. Siegel told me, 'You can still be the person you want to be—don't let cancer stop you,'" recalls Joan. He recommended techniques such as meditation and yoga to support her immune system. When a friend gave her a tape by yoga instructor Liliias Folan, Joan went straight to the mat—and became a yoga devotee. "It was very strengthening," she says. When the cancer reappeared—in her lymph nodes in 2003, then in her other breast in 2004—the Bennett Center became more than a hospital for her, it was also her yoga studio. "I am one of those people for whom cancer has become a chronic disease," says Joan, who is currently battling yet another cancer episode with chemotherapy. "But we can live from recurrence to recurrence while we take advantage of activities such as yoga, meditation, and good nutrition so you're not stressed out and worried. It's about enjoying every moment because none of us knows how long we have, even if we don't have cancer."

Former patients also continue their yoga at Bennett. "I started going to yoga during my chemotherapy four years ago, and I've gone once a week ever since," says Janet Halpin of Stamford. "Though it always made me feel more relaxed and less stressed back when I was in treatment, I think I look forward to it even more now. I always know I'm going to feel great afterward, and it is a very supportive atmosphere."

Treating mind, body, and spirit

Integrative medicine, which combines traditional scientific medicine, psychology, nursing, nutrition, exercise physiology, complementary therapies, and spiritual belief to enhance the natural healing capacities of the body and

mind, is often a boon for those in cancer treatment. Embracing a holistic approach to oncology care, Bennett aims to treat the whole person to help reduce stress, promote a positive attitude, decrease pain, and improve the quality of life. Patients participate in art programs, nutrition planning, and personal training, and experience the healing power of Reiki, meditation, hypnotherapy, music and sound healing, reflexology, and tai chi. "Some of the people who come to the art program have never drawn or painted before, but that really doesn't matter," says Karen Wakely, art program coordinator. "It's a wonderful way for them to make friends, feel supported, and release some of their stress in dealing with cancer. We work with patients and their spouses and children, providing them with a creative means of expression." Program participants paint murals



Loving Acceptance

by Joan O'Brien

I want to be limber and flexible as I age. I want to be graceful and delicate as a flower on a substantial stem, swaying in the breeze, lifting its face to the sun in salutation.

I have found this goal possible to achieve through my practice of yoga. Over the years, I have learned to be in the moment and listen as my body instructs me what it can do on a particular day in class.

Yoga teaches us "do no harm"—do nothing in practice that would cause pain or injury. I have found that my forward bend does not extend as far as before, and that Headstands and Shoulder Stands are no longer a part of my repertoire. There are so many other positions, however—twists and stretches—that make my body say, "Aah, yes, this is good." But, oh, there is that twinge in the back again, and I know what problems it can cause. So I ease back, shift and modify.

I am not in competition with anyone in class. I only need to account for myself, and I have given myself loving acceptance.

on hospital walls and exhibit framed artwork. Each year, they create a calendar, sold at the Bennett Cancer Center, to directly benefit patients and families. The annual Bennett Cancer Center Hope in Motion, Walk, Run & Ride event provides vital ongoing funding.

"These treatments have helped me more than I realize," notes one patient. "At first, it was something to look forward to—a little treat in the midst of pain, chemo, and depression. It got



Annette, Susan, Joan, and Ted (right to left) are just a few of the participants of the Bennett yoga class. Their teacher (pictured at right) is Fit Yoga's editor-in-chief, Rita Trieger. "I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to meet and share yoga with these incredible people," says Rita. "They have become my teachers and have shown me what it is to live with grace and a joyous heart."



me out of the house. And it made me feel better. With each session, I feel myself getting stronger and more relaxed. I know I have a long way to go, but these treatments have certainly put me on the right path. I am making progress, and it gives me hope."

Patients who choose integrative services work with a staff member to learn about and schedule specific sessions, including three free sessions each of Reiki, reflexology, and chair massage. The majority of the offerings are geared for patients who are in treatment, but the Exercise & Nutrition Program continues for patients post-treatment. Joan, for example, goes to a weekly reflexology session along with strength-training and tai chi.

What began strictly in an outpatient setting, with six practitioners and services available eight hours a week, has grown to a staff of nine with services provided 20 hours each week and touching more than 1,500 patients last year alone.

Yoga for life

Joan, who is now 66 (and joyfully celebrates every new birthday) continues taking yoga class at Bennett and commits to her home practice as well. For her challenges with

lymphedema (swelling), she does Viparita Karani (Legs Up the Wall) and modifies some poses—Shoulder Stand with a block, for example. "It doesn't matter if you can do the pose to the utmost, just as long as you keep doing it [with modifications], and it makes you feel wonderful inside and stretches you and wakes up your body," she notes. "I use a lot of bolsters, and I just can do what I can do." Joan starts by rotating her arms and head and doing stretches and Sun Salutations. "I feel that for breast-cancer patients, it's especially important to have an open heart—and do poses that open the heart physically and emotionally and help you give up any guilt or resentment—and to feel the breath flowing," she says. "I breathe much more deeply than I ever have. And at the end of class, I feel so good.

"If I can't get down in Pigeon Pose, or my hip is tight," she continues. "I adjust for that and I keep working on it.

I know if I didn't do yoga, I would be in much worse shape. I go to the edge of what I can do so that my body can be lubricated and strengthened and oxygenated. I want people to know that even if you're ill or physically restrained in some way, you can still get such wonderful beauty and satisfaction out of it."

In class with other cancer patients, the focus is on restorative yoga, where

the support for each other is immeasurable. "It's almost as if souls are joining," shares Joan. "If someone is having treatment, everyone is very empathetic; and if anyone wants to talk about anything or needs help, everyone knows they don't have to hesitate or feel embarrassed. We just share this wonderful feeling of being together in an environment of caring. And our teacher absolutely nurtures that loving, caring environment." [Ed Note: Joan's teacher is Rita Trieger, editor-in-chief of Fit Yoga.]

Does a yoga mind help Joan address the recurrences? "I have embraced all the arms of yoga," acknowledges Joan. "I've become more centered over the years. I find my happiness deep inside. Yoga has helped me do better meditation and discover how I can be comfortable in my body, to put things outside on the doorstep, and quiet the chatter in my mind. It has helped me live in the moment." 🧘

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