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Cancer-surviving Nurse Develops Meditation Program



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By E'Louise Ondash, RN, contributor

Twelve years ago, when Mary Hallman, RN, was diagnosed with advanced fallopian tube cancer, she decided that meditation would be a helpful complement to her surgery and chemotherapy.

"Suddenly I was in new world," recalled the 63-year-old Minneapolis resident. "The statistics said I had a serious diagnosis. The odds of surviving weren't good. But I had good medical care and I incorporated alternatives that worked for me."

What Hallman needed, she said, was a positive point of reference to carry her through what would be long and difficult therapy and hopefully, recovery. She found this in meditation, which "created a deep relaxation. I had visions of cancer cells slowly morphing, shifting form and disappearing."

It wasn't until several years later when Hallman had done some research that she realized that what she had created in her mind's eye represented apoptosis—a form of cell death. The science books describe it as a process "in which a programmed sequence of events leads to the elimination of cells without releasing harmful substances."

"(My meditation images were) the cancer cells leaving my body," Hallman explained. "It was this use of imagery that gave me a vision for recovery and healing."

Hallman thought her experience might benefit others as well, so with the help of her two daughters, graphic artists and a musician, she produced "Visions for Cancer Recovery," a DVD that provides the images, colors and music that represent apoptosis.

"It supplies a mental oasis for people with cancer and gives them a little added treatment power," she said. "As far as we know, it's the first piece of its kind to bridge the science and the arts."

The DVD runs 20 minutes, a length of time that allows for "repeated viewing and optimal benefits," she said. "It's meant to be watched again and again, especially after chemotherapy treatments."

Producing "Visions," from conception to completion, took five years – much longer than Hallman ever anticipated.

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"The idea was like a bad pet that kept nagging at me," she said. Finally, "my daughters said, 'Let's just do it.'"

Hallman was in the business of restoring and renovating homes until age 40, when she decided to become a nurse. She still has dreams of working with people in a third-world country; in the meantime, she continues her work part-time in the Hennepin County Medical Center trauma unit. She also espouses the benefits of alternative therapies.

"The DVD is not a substitute for conventional medicine like chemotherapy, radiation or surgery," Hallman said, "but it's meant to be complementary. When we started (selling the DVD), we had to explain ourselves to a lot of people. They wanted scientific proof as to how this could possibly work."

That's not the case anymore; "Visions" has gone mainstream.

For instance, the Mayo Clinic Cancer Center in Rochester, Minnesota, makes it available to their patients. It is one choice among many in their video-on-demand in-hospital system.

"It passed our educational and clinical suitability," said a spokeswoman, who added that she couldn't comment further except to say that "we found it to be beneficial for patients."

Melding traditional and alternative medicine provides the best of both worlds of healing, Hallman said.

"People are just realizing that things like meditation can influence our bodies to heal. The more relaxed we can be, the better for healing."

In addition to learning about the production of DVDs, Hallman said her experience with cancer has given her a "different perspective.

"It changes you and your outlook on life. It pulls you into the moment."

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