

PSYCHONEUROIMMUNOLOGIC MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Aromatherapy

ART

Animal
Assisted
Activity

BIOENERGETIC

TECHNIQUES

Music Massage
Relaxation skills

Integrative Therapies

A VALUABLE ROLE IN PATIENT CARE

By Esther Johnson

You may know them by the terms alternative or complementary therapies, but whatever you call them, integrative therapies are non-pharmacologic approaches to pain and symptom management. As such, they have a valuable place in home health and hospice care. In this article, the psychoneuroimmunologic mind-body connection will be explored, and the use of integrative therapies that employ that connection will be explained and demonstrated in case studies.

Pathways Home Health & Hospice in Sunnyvale, California, is one of the many organizations that now uses integrative therapies. This article will address the way Pathways' staff utilizes them to assist patients, families and caregivers at the end of life. The integrative therapies Pathways uses include modalities such as relaxation skills, bioenergetic techniques, massage, art, music, aromatherapy and animal assisted activities.

Many of these modalities stimulate the body's own natural relaxation response, which helps alleviate stress, anxiety and pain. Interested Pathways staff and volunteers learn techniques to elicit these natural responses, and integrate these physical, emotional and spiritual techniques into their visits with patients and caregivers, to complement more traditional medical treatment approaches and help patients achieve the best quality of life possible.

Relaxation techniques vary from progressive muscle relaxation to guided imagery, and from meditation to hypnosis. Bioenergetic methods embrace Reiki, healing touch, quantum touch, therapeutic touch and Acutonics, which uses vibrating tuning forks placed on acupressure points.

The emerging field of psychoneuroimmunology, or PNI, focuses on the neural paths that connect the brain and the endocrine and immune systems. The conduits between these systems may be a communication network between the mind and body, enabling them to influence each other, as well as health and healing. We know the central nervous, endocrine and immune systems are not truly separate systems, but different parts of a complex single system. When we use mind body medicine, we tap into the electrical brain, the chemical brain, receptors, peptides and memory.



*Esther Johnson demonstrates the relaxing effect of Reiki to Pathways' employee Ricardo Ibarra.
Photo taken by Deborah Stinchfield,
Pathways Home Care, Hospice & Private Duty.*

Neurons, axons and dendrites in the brain use neurotransmitters like acetylcholine to relay electrical communication across synapses. But the electrical brain accounts for only 2 percent of all communication in the PNI system. The chemical brain is now often called the "second nervous system", and is transmitting the other 98 percent using receptors and peptides, newer terms for neurotransmitters.

Peptides such as adrenaline, acetylcholine, interleukins (cytokines), insulin, angiotensin, dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin have effects throughout the body. PNI is providing evidence that our emotions are not just confined to the brain, but are bi-directional in nature. Emotions we know to be in our minds will

manifest physically through peptides and receptors. Our memories are encoded or stored in cells at the receptor level. It is speculated that memory processes are emotionally driven and unconscious, but like other receptor mediated processes, can sometimes be made conscious. One can retrieve different memories depending on the bio-chemical state, such as the use of imagery, aromatherapy, or the physical laying on of hands (as in Reiki or comfort touch) or animal assisted activities.

This author, a Hospice RN Case Manager and Integrative Therapies Specialist for Pathways Home Care & Hospice, has 25 years of experience in the arena of integrative therapies. The following are case studies from my work with three hospice patients.

Teddi was an incredibly vivacious, alive person who often chose pain over decreased alertness caused by her pain medication. She had great difficulty accepting her prognosis, but responded well to the array of integrative therapies Esther offered, including comfort touch massage, scented oils and guided imagery. One day Teddi relived, through guided imagery, a special visit to Hong

Kong, with all its exotic colors, smells and sights. The associations produced a state of pleasure and relaxation, which allowed her to recall and reminisce about her life, and more easily accept her eventual decline.

Aromatherapy, using the essential oil of lavender, allowed Teddi to relax and rest without the need for anti-anxiety medication she preferred not to take. Often the home health aide would add lavender to her bath water, or mix a drop into lotion and give Teddi a hand, foot or shoulder rub to promote relaxation. And during Teddi's final days just placing a tissue with a drop of lavender oil into the pillowcase allowed her to sleep more comfortably.

Steve was a young husband and father who suffered from pain, paralysis and anxiety. He was unsure of the course his disease would take, and felt a sense of urgency to complete many tasks that would keep him in the memories of his two young children after his death. Esther used guided imagery and Reiki to assist Steve to relax, reduce the pain in his body and prioritize his tasks during each visit. The gentle tone of Esther's voice and his ability to transport himself to a beautiful beach at sunset, allowed Steve to feel safe and comfortable. Reiki often diminished his pain level completely. A hospice volunteer provided massage to Steve, and the Spiritual Care staff worked with Steve and his family, using art to help the children express feelings about what was happening in the family.

After each session, Steve was able to work on creative ways to maintain a fatherly presence in his children's lives. Choosing gifts to be delivered on every birthday until his children reached adult hood, Steve made recordings and videos for them, telling stories, sending them wishes, and expressing his dreams and desires to be delivered at important milestones in life: graduations, weddings and the births of their own children. His comfort level allowed Steve to fill 15 years of the future and ease the pain of leaving his children. By including integrative therapies as part of the hospice plan of care in addition to traditional pain and symptom management, Steve was able to plan and implement his goals, while remaining clear headed and comfortable.

Sophia was a beautiful three year old, suffering from a rare genetic disorder. Using Reiki, story telling, and Acutonics®, Sophia was kept comfortable. Weekly blood draws from her emaciated arms was challenging, so Esther created the story of the Happy Blood Cells for Sophia. Each week she captured Sophia's attention with facial expressions, songs and adventures of the happy blood cells,

while Sophia's nurse drew the blood easily. Blood draw day became easier and Esther provided Sophia with Reiki before, during and after this procedure to help Sophia stay calm and centered. She usually left the toddler sleeping soundly.



Left to right, Teddi, baby Sophia with Kate, from Pathways, and Steve. All of whom have benefited from the Integrative therapies administered by Pathways Home Health & Hospice.

As Sophia's life drew to a close, Esther again used Acutonics® in the energy field around Sophia's body and on acupressure points on the soles of her feet. The vibration of the tuning forks is intended to stimulate and balance physical and subtle energy fields to promote healing and inner harmony. Esther believes this technique allowed Sophia to relax, releasing her energy to the universe, resulting in a peaceful and comfortable death.

The use of integrative therapies has many benefits. The techniques are cost efficient and easy to implement, and the therapies can be provided by any staff member who has been trained, and many can be taught to family members or caregivers. Implementing integrative therapies allows people to take a more active role in their care, empowers them, and offers them more choices with fewer side effects. Giving choices helps maintain dignity and sense of self – which is, after all, one of the important goals of home care and hospice.

Pathways Home Health, Hospice & Private Duty is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that provides a continuum of health services at home in the San Francisco Bay Area. Pathways serves over 7,000 families annually, with over 900 patients on service on any given day. For more information visit www.pathwayshealth.org or call 408.730.5100.

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