

FOCUS ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

Coordinated by the Initiative for Women with Disabilities

Yoga and the Mind/Body Connection:

By Alena Gerst

Over the past three decades, yoga has swept the nation with a health care reform of its own.

Yoga has become a multibillion dollar industry, encompassing the weight loss industry, clothing industry, mats and accessories and complete yoga retreats at international luxury destinations.

So how does a fitness trend so ingrained in popular culture and commerce have anything to do with Social Work?

Organizations like the Yoga Research and Education Center and the International Association of Yoga Therapists have contributed considerable evidence showing benefits to people with physical disabilities, mood disorders and severe mental illness. Unfortunately these groups often have limited or no access to the mainstream practice of yoga.

Benefits are not limited to the physical body. New York City psychiatrist Richard Brown writes that body and mind awareness through yoga can be an effective gateway to better track negative thoughts and understand emotions. Using yoga as a complement to traditional psychotherapy can be especially beneficial for people adjusting to physical disabilities and chronic illness.

At the Initiative for Women with Disabilities (IWD) women are reaping the benefits of a mind/body approach throughout the center. Individual and group counseling sessions introduce mindfulness techniques, breath and body awareness. The center offers a full yoga program as well as other wellness services.

Because of the perception of yoga as a rigorous physical exercise, social workers whose clients could benefit from mindful-awareness training often rule it out. In "Yoga for Depression" Amy Weintraub writes, "It is easy to practice yoga as though it were exercise, moving from posture to posture, with little awareness of the sensations in your body or your feeling state. This is unconscious yoga, and you run the risk of energetically reinforcing old patterns and habits of mind."

Mary, diagnosed with autoimmune disease several years ago, came to see the IWD social worker with complaints of fatigue, pain and sadness over the loss of her highly energetic lifestyle.

They explored different scenarios she found stressful, and examined in each scenario how she felt in her body.

They practiced seated forward bends, resting the front

of her head on a supportive surface, which can have a calming effect and included breath awareness.

Mary reports the combination of talking about her adjustment to illness and tuning into her body has been effective in helping her cope with symptoms and stress relief.

The steady rise in the use of yoga in medical centers and non-profit organizations signifies heightened awareness among the health care community. Finding a social worker who can

introduce appropriate physical postures and breathing exercises can add a powerful adjunct in the healing process.

Alena Gerst is a Social Worker at the IWD. The Initiative for Women with Disabilities is a multi-disciplinary women's center offering medical and gynecological services stressing health and wellness for women with physical disabilities.

Visit IWD's website, www.IWDWellness.org or come and visit us at our new location at 359 Second Ave.

Celebrating at IWD



At the Initiative for Women with Disabilities (IWD) Holiday Party singer/songwriter Theresa Sareo, second from left, was presented with the Friend of the IWD Award. She is joined by, left to right, Dir. of Development Melissa Sosa, IWD Dir. Judith Goldberg and Charlie Hammerman representing his parents Elly and Steve Hammerman.