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Reiki at Hearst Cancer Resource Center During COVID-19

BY STACY MITCHELL

“I have to admit I did not know what to expect from the online Energy Balancing program. But, for me, the best part is the peace I feel at the end of each session. All my anxiety seems to drain away, and I am left feeling energized and ready to meet the challenges of the day. What a gift! Thank you!”

THESE WORDS OF FEEDBACK came from a participant after nearly a full year of offering our long-standing volunteer Energy Balancing Clinic for a local cancer resource center online. I am filled with

gratitude because of the way our team has been able to continue making a difference in the lives of the people we serve through the resiliency of Reiki.

Like the rest of the world, when the pandemic hit the Central Coast of California, where I live, in early 2020, hard choices had to be made. We all looked for avenues to continue our routines in new and diverse ways. As the team leader for the volunteer Energy Balancing Clinic at Hearst Cancer Resource Center (HCRC) for many years, we offered in-person sessions to cancer survivors and their caregivers. My main goal was to make sure that our team

could somehow maintain our connection to our participants and continue offering them the peaceful healing and unconditional love Reiki provides.

This volunteer program has been going strong since 2008, staffed by a small but dedicated group of Reiki Masters and practitioners. Many of the original members, now retired, were trained and initiated to Reiki by a beloved local nun. A Catholic-run hospital system operates HCRC itself, and in the program's infancy, the Board of Directors would refer to our volunteer clinic as "energy balancing" rather than Reiki.

We were fortunate the Center's administrator, from its inception through to retirement at the end of 2020, was a person who understood the importance of our offerings to the community and always made sure our energy balancing team was supported and promoted. My role has always been to uphold the vision of the original Reiki Masters who formed this team—to have a small group of dedicated Reiki practitioners available twice a month for in-person sessions at the Center to support the participants with Reiki throughout their cancer journey.

The HCRC staff and hospital volunteers handled the registrations for the in-person sessions, which were in 30-minute increments for two hours twice a month. Our team of community volunteers would arrive early to the classroom at the Center, set up four massage tables (donated by the original team members) and cover them with hospital provided sheets and blankets, turn off the piped-in music and turn on our specially chosen (and Reiki charged) music for relaxation, turn down the bright lights, ready a water station, and prep the room energetically with our Reiki symbols. Then, the Center staff would check in each participant and send them to the waiting area where we would individually escort them to a table, help them situate themselves, and in brief whispers communicate with them about any specific healing intentions or areas of concern they wished for us to focus energy on during the hands-on session.

If a participant were new to the "energy balancing" service we offered, I would meet with them in the waiting area. I would answer questions they had and explain to them what the session would entail and that the intention was for them to relax and receive the energy for themselves as regulated by their body system. Unfortunately, because the sessions were short, we rarely had time to visit with the

participants. Still, over time we built rapport, and everyone was always amazed and appreciative of our offerings for their health and well-being.

By COVID-19 in early 2020, we had a solid team of volunteers and a steady stream of seasoned and new participants. The administrator and the nurse navigator were excellent at describing our energy balancing clinic and encouraged people to sign up. As a result, we had three to four volunteer Reiki practitioners available each time and served 12 to 16 participants at each bi-monthly session. Then, in March 2020, when the pandemic forced HCRC to suspend all in-person group events to protect their vulnerable patients temporarily, I immediately contacted the administrator and explained our team could continue offering the energy balancing clinic virtually. They were quite surprised because they didn't realize that Reiki doesn't require hands-on contact to be effective, but they were excited about the prospect.

Since no one knew what we would face, there was a bit of confusion and difficulty getting the word out and getting people registered to attend, but we never missed even one session. Rather than being expected to go through the (dwindling) staff for handling the sessions, I was provided the contact information of those who expressed interest in remaining on the notification list. I did not want to make the virtual experience difficult for anyone with extra hoops like online registration and passwords but also wanted to protect our participants' personal and medical privacy. So, a few days before each session, I email each a reminder of the date and time for the next session, a request they sign on from a quiet space where they can sit or lie down comfortably, and the Zoom link for that session. The participants are held in the waiting room each time until I open the virtual doors and welcome them in. The sessions are never recorded, so the participants know they are in a safe, private space, and they may also turn their video feeds on and off at will.

When I transitioned from in-person sessions to the online format, I didn't know if anyone would show up or how they would feel about it, including my team. There was no time to think; I just sent Reiki to the situation and requested help navigating this new way of doing things. Aside from this leap to virtual Reiki, the biggest change I made was converting the once individual hands-on sessions to a one-hour group session format—mainly because I knew I

might be the only volunteer available at times. I have been grateful our team has rolled with these changes to our routine as well. Two of them, Carolyn, and Denise have taken part in almost every session with me. In addition, Shannon and Marissa join in for the sessions they can between work and family obligations.

Shannon shared these thoughts via email: “As a health-care provider, Reiki has lifted me when I have needed that little bit of faith to hold on to; it has carried me through the darkness of COVID-19. The Reiki group has given me something positive to hold on to, practice, and in which to believe. Rumi said, ‘Love is not an emotion; it is your very existence.’ This is how I feel about Reiki; it is pure love. I am love, and I am loved. This is how Reiki makes me feel, and I am eternally grateful.”

Certainly, none of us expected this transition would be necessary for more than a few months. But COVID-19 and its variants have had other ideas. A lot has changed in the year and a half (and counting). We have been offering the energy balancing clinic virtually. One of our team volunteers, Dawn, died in the summer of 2020. By the end of that year, all the staff of HCRC we knew had been released or retired. I asked our team to send Reiki to the board, the selection team, and the new employees with the intention they will continue to support our group and its participants for the highest and best good of all involved. I have not met the new administrator, nurse navigator, or other key staff, as our interaction is only by phone or email. Several of the participants for the in-person sessions never signed up for the virtual ones. Since they were not on the original email list I received, I have had no way to check in with them to see how they are or if they would like to experience a virtual session now.

The participants who have attended our virtual sessions have been a mix of those who were previously receiving in-person sessions from our team and new participants who have found out about us through various means. Often, I get an email either directly from the individual or from an HCRC staff member with their contact information and a request to add them to the notification list. Participation requirements remain the same: those affected by any type of cancer as a patient or caregiver and living in San Luis Obispo County.

With experimentation and openness to allowing Reiki to lead the way, we have found a rhythm as a team that works

well for us. All practitioners and participants sign on to the meeting at the stated time. We briefly chat as we wait for the invariable stragglers and welcome any new participants. Depending on how many people are present and how many practitioners are available, I determine whether it is workable to use the breakout room option within Zoom to give participants one-on-one session time with a practitioner.

We first go around the virtual room, and each person states their healing needs/intentions. This method allows all practitioners to hear from each person and has the added benefit of developing group rapport. I then lead a Holy Fire® III Reiki meditation while playing relaxing music in the background using controls for playing music found in the Zoom set up features. The addition of the meditation has been a wonderful way to “set the room” and bring everyone into a cohesive healing space while also supporting their individual needs.

From this point, we can seamlessly transition either to the individual breakout room sessions or to all practitioners sending distance Reiki to each participant in the group simultaneously. During in-person sessions, I have observed that participants with neuropathy in the feet seem to benefit more from the session by receiving the Reiki energy first to their feet rather than starting at the head. Our team has continued to treat those individuals in the same manner virtually, and most report they experience more sensation and less pain overall after the sessions. The total session time is forty-five minutes to an hour. Afterward, I email the designated staff member our statistics regarding how many people we served for the program during that session (usually 4 to 10). I often receive a lovely email thanking us for continuing to offer our energy balancing clinic virtually.

We have been doing it this way so long now it is hard to remember how we were doing it before, but we are all awaiting the day when we can once again physically touch and hug our participants and offer them hands-on Reiki sessions. One of our long-time participants had this to say, “I would never have thought that meeting virtually, I could feel the peaceful, healing energy that I experienced with the in-person sessions. I am very grateful for the time twice a month to help me relax and heal in ways my body needs.”

I am already looking to Reiki for guidance on incorporating the meditations once we transition back to the

individual in-person sessions, as they have been popular and beneficial in the group setting. For now, I have posted a few to my YouTube and Instagram pages so our participants and others can have access to them whenever it is convenient for them. I have also committed to our group to continue making the virtual sessions available for those who prefer receiving our offerings in the comfort of their own homes, at least for a transitional period when that time comes. Until it does, we are grateful to have had the technology and the distance Reiki skills available to offer our energy balancing clinic virtually. ■

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Stacy Mitchell is an Usui/Holy Fire® III Reiki Master and Holy Fire® Karuna Reiki® Master. She has been offering sessions and classes in private practice since 2009, often with crystals, sound, and shamanic healing techniques. In addition, she is a certified Life-Cycle Celebrant®, Soul Realignment® Advanced Practitioner, and Sacred Childbirth with Reiki® Practitioner. She also volunteers as the team lead of the Energy Balancing Clinic at Hearst Cancer Resource Center and as a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) in San Luis Obispo County, California. Stacy can be reached through her website at www.honoryourvoice.com, via email at reikistacy@honoryourvoice.com, or by phone at 805-208-4167. Follow her on IG @celebrantstacy.