Cancer Health 25: Sandeep (Anu) Kaur, MS, RDN

A nutritionist who believes in the power of food and yoga to nourish the mind and body of cancer survivors

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The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

It may seem counterintuitive to befriend cancer, but that is exactly what Sandeep (Anu) Kaur, MS, RDN — a nutritionist, 500-level registered yoga instructor and a certified health and wellness coach — aims to teach cancer patients to do. That means stepping away from the idea of battling cancer and embracing a more holistic healing approach through yoga and nutrition. The goal is to help survivors live in the present moment and practice culinary and lifestyle medicine along with compassionate self-care.

Kaur, 50, came to the idea by working as a dietitian with cancer patients. As these patients told her about the stress and fears they faced, she shifted her work toward nourishment of the mind and body rather than simply teaching nutrition guidelines. Kaur's own cancer experience—she had a malignant ovarian tumor— also informed her work.

In 2007, she began practicing Hatha and Kundalini yoga. She saw the difference the breathing and meditation techniques that characterize this practice made in her day-to-day life and began to study the evidence behind such mind-body practices. She now incorporates yoga and other mind-body-spirit practices into what she calls her “heart work.”

One example is a course she offers at oncologists’ office called Befriending Cancer, which she co-teaches with a yoga instructor. Another is four-week online course Nutrition to Nourishment. Her goal is to help people make long-lasting behavioral and lifestyle changes. “I start with food as medicine and focus on what to eat, along with when and how to eat—mindfully. I find if people can connect with their breath, they feel more grounded and calmer and, in many cases, they have a deeper experience in connecting with feelings of mindfulness when eating,” she wrote in an issue of Yoga Therapy. In that way, yoga and nutrition work together to boost the immune system by reducing inflammation brought about by the chronic stress of having cancer.

Kaur also works as a nutritional consultant and has worked at the National Cancer Institute’s division of cancer prevention at the National Institutes of Health as well as other organizations. She also has her own private integrative nutrition and wellness coaching practice via telehealth and in the metro Washington, DC area.

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