Cancer-Friendly Spas

Wellness for Cancer teaches spas how to welcome people with cancer.

March 18, 2019 By Bob Barnett

Julie Bach lost both her parents to cancer. Her dad went first. When Bach's mom developed ovarian cancer and serious depression, there was no one at home to take care of her. Julie's then husband had a recommendation. "Your mother needs to go to a spa," he said. "She needs to be touched." Bach arranged spa treatments at a local cancer center, and they greatly eased her mother's journey.

Many people aren't so lucky. "Most spas turn people with cancer away," Bach says. Reasons range from myths that massage could spread cancer (it can't) to concerns about not being educated enough about cancer to be helpful. Bach has made it her life's work to change all that. Since 2012, her organization, Wellness for Cancer, has trained staff at more than 200 hotels and spas around the United States and in 40 other countries.

While many major cancer centers offer integrative care, including specialized oncology massage—as do a few spas—the goal of Wellness for Cancer isn't to train spa staff to provide medical services. Rather, it helps staff develop the knowledge and sensitivity needed to offer standard services such as massage, skin care treatments, meditation and yoga to cancer patients during and after treatment. Staff members are educated about cancer and trained to make adjustments—for example, not to massage near a chemo port or near areas where lymph nodes have been removed or radiated. People currently being treated for cancer should check with their own care team about precautions too.

"People want normalcy, flexibility and compassion," says Bach. "After you are treated at a cancer center, you still need to heal, to take time for yourself, ideally in a beautiful place that's created to help you reset and renew." Often, caregivers go too. Bach aspires to develop a directory of cancer-friendly spas; until then, email her for local suggestions (Julie@wellnessforcancer.com).

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