Ecstatic Healing

Dancing through cancer with Dr. Deborah Cohan

January 3, 2018 By Casey Halter

Four years ago, Deborah Cohan, MD, a physician and obstetrician-gynecologist at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, went viral on the internet in the midst of her battle with breast cancer. But her story isn't the typical tale of fear, reckoning and recovery that cancer patients are often primed for when they receive their diagnosis.

Instead, Cohan made her journey a celebration of life, literally dancing her way into the operating room surrounded by a team of shimmying nurses and surgeons, smiling and gyrating her hips to Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied" as she prepared to go under for a double mastectomy.

"I wanted to be my soulful self. I didn't want fear to win. I didn't want to walk into the operating room afraid," Cohan says about that fateful day at the beginning of her battle. The video of her dance, which was later uploaded to YouTube by a friend, has been watched over 8 million times. Her video and advocacy have also sparked an online movement of cancer patients devoted to looking at things a little bit differently.

With Cohan's cancer finally in remission, Cancer Health caught up with "Dr. Deb the Dancing Doc" to map her journey, talk about her experiences with complementary therapies and discuss the ecstatic, holistic healing she embodies.

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Facing Her Fears

"I was a healthy yet overworked 44-year-old. I exercised, breast-fed my children for a total of four years, ate organic food. On the surface, I had no obvious risk factors for cancer," Cohan says, reflecting on her diagnosis in the fall of 2013.

After she discovered a tumor during a self-exam, Cohan's radiologist ultimately told her that she had invasive ductal carcinoma, in which malignant cells begin growing in the milk ducts and later invade the fatty tissue of the breast. The most common type of breast cancer in the United States, it accounts for about 80 percent of all breast cancers and affects more than 180,000 American women per year, according to the American Cancer Society.

Cohan, who has been studying movement in one form or another since she was 3 years old, didn't

start out dancing about her diagnosis.

“I kind of went for it in terms of my initial exploration of fears—death, losing my kids who were 5 and 8 at the time, dying alone,” she recalls. But as a doctor who’s seen firsthand the effects of a surprise diagnosis on her patients, Cohan also knew that the first thing she needed to do was take some time to process and seek support.

That first day, she took a leave of absence from work, called her family and headed to her weekly Soul Motion dance class. Despite feeling overwhelmed and afraid, Cohan says she decided to imagine death as her dance partner during the class.

“Somehow, I think addressing my fears directly and doing it in a place that was really safe emotionally for me, surrounded by friends and community, allowed me to pop through it. Near the end of the class, I actually felt joy in my body,” Cohan remembers.

She wound up making dance an integral part of her cancer journey—and the rest is history.

On Cohan’s cancer recovery page on Facebook today, one can still watch dozens of copycat videos featuring patients grooving in the face of their health crises. There’s 16-year-old Amari Hall, dancing in celebration of a successful heart transplant. There’s 32-year-old uterine cancer survivor Ana-Alecia Ayala cutting a rug through chemotherapy. And there’s fellow breast cancer patient Doreta Noris getting down to “Gangnam Style” as she makes her way into surgery.

“It was a little surprising when I woke up to find that the video had gone viral,” says Cohan. But the community that her brave action has since given rise to was worth the shock.

Cohan says she took immediate control of her cancer care after her diagnosis.

“I shopped around,” she recalls, listing off the mastectomy surgeons, plastic surgeons, oncologists and radiation specialists she interviewed before undergoing any treatment. “I compiled my own team and came up with a plan,” the dancing doc explains, and today she urges others facing cancer to do the same.

On the advice of her doctors, Cohan underwent a bilateral mastectomy, removing both of her breasts and nearby lymph nodes. She also underwent four rounds of chemotherapy using cyclophosphamide and Taxotere (docetaxel).

Cohan finished chemo and breast reconstruction in 2014 and now takes an aromatase inhibitor to halt the production of estrogen, which could cause her cancer to come back. In between work, online advocacy and taking care of her kids, Cohan still dances—and has begun spreading the wisdom of dance therapy throughout the cancer community.

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Dance as Medicine

Today, if you visit Cohan's office at SF General, where she is an ob-gyn working with couples affected by HIV, you might notice a stack of "Movement Is Your Medicine" or "Hip Hop to Health" prescription notes lying on her desk.

"I give them out when a patient is stuck, when they have been trying something over and over again and it's not working for them," Cohan says.

On the notes, some people are directed to dance every morning, others, during their work breaks. Often, her patients are told to get down simply "as needed" while they work through illnesses like cancer, diabetes and depression. "It's a way of disrupting the script a little bit and allowing people to at least explore an invitation to do things differently," she adds.

Since overcoming cancer, Cohan has started the Foundation for Embodied Medicine, a nonprofit that hosts dance, meditation and mindfulness workshops for patients, caregivers and medical providers. Once a month or so, Cohan travels to hospitals, dance studios and offices across California to teach others to dance like she does and kick-start their own healing through holistic, complementary care.

"I didn't start teaching cancer patients until after my diagnosis," says Cohan, who specializes in a practice called conscious dance and has been sharing her secrets with fellow doctors for years. "It includes conscious movement and stillness for increasing one's awareness of their body and becoming more present." Conscious dancing ranges from ecstatic dance to somatic movement therapy and encompasses more than 100 different types of movement.

Dance and music therapy have started to gain a major following in many medical research and physician communities outside of Cohan's circle. Studies show that patients who listen to music during surgery may experience markedly lower blood pressure and stress levels and require less supplementary sedation than those who undergo an operation in a silent room. Research also suggests that people who listen to music posttreatment may have less inflammation and faster recovery times.

As for dance, besides the physical benefits and psychosocial support Cohan credits with aiding her along her journey, studies show that dance can also help people with cancer soothe symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as cope with postsurgical challenges, such as fatigue, joint pain, weakness and balance problems.

Cohan says her love of dance and music makes her a better doctor.

"Being in your body can be really helpful in terms of interacting with patients," she explains. "Many of us physicians have been living in our heads for so long."

Studies show that surgeons show fewer signs of stress and demonstrate improved job performance when they operate to the sounds of self-selected music. Taking cues from dance therapy—such as synchronizing breathing patterns with a patient and paying attention to where they hold tension in their bodies—can help doctors like Cohan reduce patient stress and provide a

more personalized practice. “Obviously, it’s incredibly helpful for pregnant women in preparation for labor,” she explains.

Cohan compares her cancer diagnosis to a sort of “cosmic two-by-four—a message that I’m meant to do this work and be an ambassador for conscious dance in conventional medical settings.”

Deborah Cohan, MDWinne Wintermeyer

Finding Her Therapy

Dance and movement weren’t the only techniques beyond traditional medical treatment that Cohan tried to help get her through her cancer. She also incorporated meditation, tai chi, qigong, acupuncture and energy practices such as Reiki and Tibetan healing into her regimen.

“I think what’s been so important for me is finding my medicine and not just accepting what’s been suggested to me,” Cohan explains. “My diagnosis gave me an opportunity to explore all these different healing modalities that are not classically a part of conventional biomedicine. It was a very eye-opening and mind-opening part of my experience.”

These therapies, Cohan says, are known in the medical world as complementary therapies, meaning they’re used with a physician’s permission and in conjunction with—rather than instead of—proven mainstream medical methods. They tend to be pleasant, do not involve substances with pharmacological effects, are relatively inexpensive and are intended to manage side effects and improve quality of life. Importantly, they’re different from so-called alternative therapies,

which are used in place of standard medical care and sometimes make false and dangerous promises of a cure.

Like music and dance, these complementary therapies have demonstrated positive effects on the body. Several lines of research suggest that our perceptions of the world inform our immune system responses in a way that make us better able to respond to current and future illness. Fear and stress can increase levels of hormones like cortisol and epinephrine, which over time may increase inflammation and lower natural immunity.

“It’s not just a matter of killing the cancer, but also cultivating true wellness so that the body can keep any residual cancer cells in check,” Cohan explains. Plus, she adds, “I haven’t done any of it instead of. I’ve done it in addition to.”

Cohan also participated in one of the first clinical trials of the DigniCap, a scalp-cooling silicone cap system that is designed to limit hair loss during cancer treatment. She says that in addition to dance, therapy and support, the cold cap—which saved as much as half of her hair —helped her stay positive and optimistic throughout her recovery and helped her tap into the healing power of positive thinking.

“People treated me as though I were a healthy person. Instead of receiving people’s pity, I received their encouragement. I received people’s surprise that someone going through chemo could actually be vibrant and look healthy,” Cohan recalls.

Cohan’s best advice to people seeking to find strength and positivity through their own cancer treatment? “Find what brings you joy,” she says. “Even though cancer may be a big, scary roadblock in your life, don’t let cancer become your life. Find your support. Be open to healing. And, most importantly, have compassion and love for your body.”

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A Quick Guide to Complementary Therapies

Up to 60 percent of American physicians have recommended that their patients use some sort of complementary therapy to help deal with an illness. Many types of therapy may be used to help manage cancer symptoms and treatment side effects. A growing number of cancer centers offer integrative therapy that combines proven medical treatment with complementary methods.

Below are several helpful and safe treatments that have been vetted by the American Cancer Society. Complementary therapies should be used only in addition to clinically proven medical care, not as replacements. Talk to your doctor or nurse before starting any type of complementary therapy.

Acupuncture: This traditional Chinese therapy involves inserting thin needles into the skin at specific points on the body. Studies show that acupuncture may help ease pain and swelling after surgery. It may also help control side effects like nausea and vomiting during chemotherapy.

Aromatherapy: Scented oils can be inhaled or rubbed on the body during a massage. Research has found that aromatherapy may relieve side effects like anxiety, depression and nausea in people with cancer.

Art therapy: Working with a trained art therapist to create pictures or objects with personal meaning can help people with cancer and their caregivers release bottled-up feelings. Studies show that art therapy can help people cope with an illness and improve their quality of life.

Biofeedback: This technique uses devices to train people to consciously regulate their body's autonomic processes, such as respiration, blood pressure and heartbeat. Biofeedback may help people with cancer regain a sense of control over their bodies, and it can also reduce stress, pain and muscle tension.

Labyrinth walking: This ancient meditative practice involves walking along a set pathway that weaves in a circle around a central point. More than 100 health care facilities in the United States have labyrinths to help patients relieve stress, improve coordination and build strength.

Massage: Manipulating the muscles and rubbing the soft tissues of the body may help reduce cancer treatment side effects such as pain, fatigue, anxiety and depression. Massage can also help improve the health of scar tissue and increase range of motion after surgery.

Music or dance therapy: In a music therapy session, a person with cancer might listen to music, dance, sing, write lyrics, perform with simple instruments or use guided imagery along with music. Sessions can help improve emotional and physical well-being and promote relaxation throughout treatment.

Spirituality: Studies show that people who rely on their faith during cancer treatment tend to have increased hope and optimism and a higher satisfaction with life. Spiritual practices can also decrease anxiety and depression and better control nausea and discomfort.

Tai chi: This martial art is often referred to as a "moving meditation." Practitioners perform a series of slow, graceful motions, concentrating on deep breathing and posture. Tai chi may help relieve pain, anxiety and stress for cancer patients and survivors.

Yoga: Moving through gentle yoga poses during cancer treatment can help increase blood and oxygen flow throughout the body while building and maintaining strength. Yoga can also help dissipate tension and anxiety, which studies show can suppress immune function.

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