

Combining Traditional and Alternative Care for a Healthy Life

Valerie Foster

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Veronica Vawter of Danbury was frustrated. Overweight, she suffered from panic attacks and night sweats and was taking synthetic hormones to replenish those she stopped producing following a hysterectomy in 2005. After attending a seminar on weight loss given by Kenneth Hoffman at Sophia Natural Health Center in Brookfield, she decided to give him a try. Now, after a year of treatments, she says she's a totally different person.

"Ken was able to get my hormones in balance, teach me ways to handle my stress, and as a result I lost 20 pounds," Vawter says. Her night sweats, instead of being constant, are now sporadic and diminished. And she's done with hormone replacement therapy. When stress comes calling -- a fact of her life -- instead of blowing up or shutting down, she's able to discuss the issue. For Hoffman, Vawter's results are typical. He practices Integrative Chinese Medicine, what he calls a natural and powerful system to achieve optimal health.

"Our goal is to restore health naturally, without drugs and without surgery, to achieve high function in the body before disease occurs," Hoffman explains. He graduated from the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in New York City, a school based in Chinese medicine, where he learned the principles practiced in the Orient for 5,000 years, and became a licensed acupuncturist. His arsenal of tools are atypical of conventional medicine: acupuncture; thermal imaging to see the root of conditions such as headaches, carotid artery disease and breast cancer; metabolic profiling; salivary testing; and NAET for allergy elimination, a non-invasive, natural solution to alleviate allergies. Instead of looking for a diagnosis, Hoffman searches for biomarkers that can be managed before they become problematic, another way to say he's all about prevention.

Which is why Dr. Tamara Sachs has no problem sending her patients to Hoffman. "We often work tough cases together," she says. "We do things differently, but we work well together."

Sachs was an ER doctor and internist, but today practices functional medicine and integrative care, which is a science-based approach that assesses and treats the underlying causes of illness. She focuses on a patient's genetic, biochemical and environmental uniqueness.

"Many doctors come to alternative medicine either because of their own health issues or health issues of a family member that are not resolved properly with conventional medicine," Sachs says. "There are great things about allopathic medicine [a term commonly used by homeopaths to describe "mainstream medicine"]. But there are so many patients that just don't feel well, and their doctors cannot tell them why. Often, patients are told there is nothing wrong with them and the doctors begin questioning them. They are often told they are depressed or it's in their head. The doctors blame patients when they can't make a diagnosis."

Sachs says many of her patients come to her as a last resort. Most have chronic conditions: They're overweight, have stress, cancer, digestive issues such as ulcerative colitis or irritable bowel syndrome, and autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis. She has created a detailed questionnaire that every new patient must fill out before the first appointment. It's so comprehensive that some people not willing to commit to change actually cancel their appointments. "It's also a way for people to start reframing their conceptions of their health," she says. The first appointment takes a few hours, with Sachs acting as the detective trying to uncover the root cause of medical issues. "We engage in a journey together," Sachs says. "But they are driving the car. I guide them and show them alternative ways but they are in control."

And there is one more thing she does, which she says her patients tell her is so important. "I listen to them," she says. "I value their interpretation of their health. Most people have some

level of understanding about their bodies. I never discount a patient's thought process, even if they tell me it's weird or strange. I always listen to that."

Plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Anke Ott Young works at the Norma F. Pfriem Breast Cancer Center in Fairfield and understands the importance alternative medicine plays in the health of a patient. At the Pfriem Center, the first line of defense is conventional medicine: surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and other approved conventional methods such as counseling and physical therapy. "But then we have cherry-picked proven alternative methods to help our patients," Ott Young explains. "I can make a new breast that comes out beautiful, but if the patient is obese and hypertensive, just targeting one organ will not give the patient a healthy life." Pfriem offers various alternative therapies, each scientifically based and performed by fully licensed and certified practitioners including naturopathic medicine, reiki, acupuncture, yoga, diet and nutrition counseling, exercise plans and herbal blends.

Ott Young was trained in Germany, where traditional medicine treats the whole body, not just one organ. There, if a patient experiences nausea from chemotherapy, the nurse will first make a cup of chamomile or peppermint tea, followed by aromatherapy. If this does not work, drugs are then administered. Or consider newly diagnosed diabetics, who are sent to a six-week spa to learn proper diet and nutrition and the importance of exercise and weight loss to treat their condition. Only after they learn what they need to do when they go home do they receive drugs. "Here, patients are told to lose weight and given medicine," she says. "But they never learn what they need to do to get better, how to lose weight, and the importance of exercise and how to start doing it."

Dr. Henri Roca is medical director of Greenwich Hospital's Integrative Medicine Program and is a family physician dedicated to the principles of holistic medicine. "In my practice I have the advantage of being not only a conventional physician, using everything conventional, but I also use acupuncture, hypnotherapy and biofeedback. My preference is to work on healing the body naturally with nutrition, vitamins, minerals and botanicals."

What is so interesting about Roca is that he started as a massage therapist and mind-body practitioner, working with herbs, vitamins and supplements to bring optimum health to clients before attending medical school. "I decided I needed to understand conventional medicine," he says. "Now I am able to bring both worlds together. Medicine should not be about matching the medication to the symptoms. The medicine I practice empowers me to identify a person's dysfunction and bring it into balance."

Every integrative specialist we spoke with talked about the passion they have for their work and how empowering it is for their patients to take control of their health and make changes. But there lies the problem: As Americans we are prewired to visit our doctors when we are sick and to take a pill or two to make us better. Integrative medicine practitioners want you to see your doctor before you get sick.

Dr. Jared Skowron, ND, founder of the Pediatric & Autism Clinic at the University of Bridgeport and vice president of the Pediatric Association of Naturopathic Physicians adds that in many cases, people are afraid to admit they are seeking alternatives because they don't want to seem weird. "But the word is getting out, and it is becoming socially acceptable to seek alternatives," he says. "Natural medicine is not a dirty little secret anymore."

Roca says his patients are divided into four groups:

1. Those who are healthy and want to stay that way.
2. People with terminal conditions, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's, who have been told there is nothing more that can be done for them.
3. Those who have been told that they are fine but they know they are not fine, that there is something wrong.

4. Those with multiple ailments who are searching for the underlying reason why they have conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or gout.

His first prescription for everyone, which he writes on a prescription pad, is to include a yoga practice.

Sachs says that the data proves that lifestyle medicine works. "Food, diet, exercise are as impactful as what we do medically," she adds.

Ott Young says that most of her patients have no issue combining alternative therapies with conventional treatments because a cancer diagnosis is all the motivation they need to change their lives. "If only people would just start looking at their health and seeking treatment before they get sick, before they get a cancer diagnosis, everyone would benefit.

"Preventative medicine saves so much anguish, because we can fix the medical problem before it happens," she adds. "It also saves money. Money spent upfront is so much less than money spent fixing medical issues."

WEB BONUS

Feel your best -- without popping pills

Plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Anke Ott Young works at the Norma F. Pfriem Breast Cancer Center in Fairfield and offers this prescription for a long and healthy life:

Â· Walk outdoors for 30 minutes a day. Walking in nature, be it a beach, a wooded park or a sidewalk also is a salve for your mind. Do it alone, or grab your spouse, friend or dog.

Â· Eat organic fruits and vegetables as much as possible. If you cannot afford to eat this way exclusively, eat organics for just a few meals.

Â· Use meat, chicken and fish as a condiment: smaller portions of organic, grass-fed meat and chicken, and wild-caught fish.

Â· Avoid flame-retardant clothes and Teflon-coated pans, which can emit chemicals that are bad for us.

Â· Drink an ounce of sea buckthorn daily, which, she says, eliminates problems with the nervous system. It is loaded with omega 3, 6, 7 and 9 fatty acids, making it a wonderful tonic for hair, skin and nails. Her favorite is by Sibuberry, which she drinks as part of her morning routine.

Â· And two hard behaviors to change: If you are overweight, lose weight, and if you smoke, stop smoking.