Holistic Approaches to Physical Therapy

Today there is a strong push towards holistic therapies as more and more people look for natural ways to heal and deal with chronic conditions. Make no mistake, holistic therapies such as acupuncture, meditation, and yoga have been around for thousands of years and have been used by many other cultures outside of ours to heal everything from the most common of ailments to the most serious of conditions. What has this taught us here in the West? That these natural, holistic therapies work and it is time that we pay attention to them.

A national study released in May of 2004, surveyed 31,000 people over the age of 18. What this study showed was that more than 36% of people were using holistic therapies, also known as Complimentary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies. The most common uses for these therapies were to treat depression, anxiety, joint pain, back pain, neck pain and colds.

Why are so many people turning to therapies such as yoga, acupuncture, meditation, Pilates and reflexology? If we go by what the survey said, 28% said it was because they believe that traditional medicine wouldn't help them fix their health problems. Another 13% said that they sought out the treatment from a holistic practitioner because conventional medicine was just too expensive.

The increase in patient demand has made some traditional medical care providers take note of the holistic therapies and they have begun to take a look at the advantages that yoga, meditation, and acupuncture offer their patients. As a whole, our nation is a pill popping society, and doctors realize that there is a need to get patients to be more proactive about their care instead of prescribing a pill that will make them feel better.

For example yoga has been shown to be incredibly effective in not only helping people with arthritis become more mobile, but helping them decrease pain and increase quality of life without the side effects of conventional medicinal therapy such as medication.

This isn't to say that the medical community is unanimous on whether or not holistic therapies should be used. There are basically two schools of thought amongst medical professionals today. One theory is that CAM therapies are just a bunch of fluff and can do more harm then good to a patient. Is this true? If you as person decide to start a therapy such as yoga, meditation, or acupuncture without consulting a holistic practitioner so that the proper technique and application is used, then yes, there can be harm.

Consider a patient that needs therapy for a rotator cuff injury or has what was thought to be tendonitis in the elbow. They are told by their doctor that they need to see an orthopedic specialist, who then recommends they undergo physical therapy. Instead this patient decides to start practicing yoga on their own to deal with the injury and the pain. Without proper instruction on how yoga can be used for their specific condition they could do more damage and possibly require surgery. Does this mean that yoga isn't useful for physical therapy? No what it means is that a patient needs to be under the instruction of a holistic practitioner that will teach and monitor their technique so that healing takes place.

The second school of thought is that complementary therapies are a benefit but should be used in conjunction with traditional therapies, hence the name "complementary." It is a rarity to find a traditional western doctor that would recommend or prescribe the use of complementary therapies solely. Using the therapies together can be very beneficial to the patient at the beginning. A person that is in so much pain that they are unable to move can benefit from the use of an anti-inflammatory or pain medicine to begin physical therapy.

The key is to get the patient to the point where they no longer need the pain medication and they are able to continue to their physical therapy to improve their medical condition and thereby improve their quality of life. Physical therapists know that the key to improving a condition is understanding how the body works and responds to different stresses. Physical therapists could be considered holistic practitioners, as they use the body to promote healing.
What exactly are holistic approaches to physical therapy then? There are basically four types of practices.

**Biologically based practices**

These practices use things that are found in nature to promote healing such as herbs, vitamins (in an amount higher than what conventional medicine uses) and special diets.

**Energy based medicine**

We are all made up of energy. That is a scientific fact that cannot be disputed. Energy based therapies use that energy to heal the body. These therapies would include healing touch, chakra work, Reiki.

**Manipulative and body based practices**

These are practices that are based on manipulating or moving one or more body parts. These therapies would include yoga and Pilates.

**Mind-body therapies**

These are those that use techniques to increase or improve the mind's ability to impact symptoms or body function. You can't deny the power of the mind. This can be our strongest asset or our strongest enemy. These therapies would include meditation, guided imagery and even yoga.

Here is a brief look at the different types of complementary therapies that holistic practitioners and physical therapist use.

**Yoga**

An ancient Indian body of knowledge, the word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word that means to unite and integrate. The body is treated and cared for with respect. Yoga exercises will stimulate the organs on the abdomen, put pressure on the glandular system which will improve health and circulation through slow but graceful movements of the body.

**Meditation**

Meditation is used to clear the mind of distractions and to help decrease stress, anxiety and pain. Meditation uses the mind to put the body in a place of peace and harmony.

**Pilates**

Created by Joseph Pilates, he believed that in order for the body to heal itself the mind must control the muscles. He knew that proper functioning meant unity between the mind and the body.