

Mind Over Matter

Photo by Veronica Kim



Susan Wilbanks believes positive thinking can cure what ails you.

by Shannon Cavanaugh

A year ago, Multiple Sclerosis (MS) forced 41-year-old Susan Wilbanks to give up her freedom. That meant no more Jane Fonda workouts; it meant relying on a wheelchair to get around. Despite years of fighting MS, it seemed the disease was winning. That is until Susan joined the "Mind Over MS" research study.

"I always thought my mind was my greatest ally in fighting this disease. But I had no idea how powerful my mind was until I took these classes. The mental exercises I learned have taught me how to focus. It goes way beyond positive thinking," says Susan. "It's so empowering. I feel I have a sense of control over this disease that I didn't have before."

Susan credits powerful thinking for giving her strength to walk again with the help of a walker. Susan's success story is just one of many documented in the recent "Mind Over MS" study put together by Denise Rodgers and the Association for the Development of Mind/Body Potential.

Rodgers conducted a six-month study consisting of a variety of techniques ranging from memory exercises and visualization to meditation and relaxation. A treatment group of 13 met weekly for three hours. Meanwhile, a control group of 10 received no treatment. Both groups were evaluated before, during and after the study.

"To make the study legitimate and give it credibility with the medical community, we asked Tulsa Regional Medical Center (TRMC) and the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center (OUHSC) to set up clinical guidelines," says Rodgers. "TRMC conducted physical assessments, ranging from visual acuity to grip strength and sensitivity. The results were amazing."

Results showed the treatment group improved its nerve sensitivity by 16%. Those who received no treatment reported an average 5% decrease in nerve sensitivity.

The OUHSC evaluated such cognitive abilities as learning and memory, coping skills and depression. The treatment group reported a 30% improvement in cognition when compared to those who received no treatment.

The biggest improvement was in depression. The treatment group showed a 70% reduction in depression; the control group did not improve.

Some of the exercises used in the study included learning how to visualize and improve short-term memory. Patients had to remember five things they did in the last five days in reversal.

Rodgers also took a piece of copper wire and covered it with plastic. Typically in MS patients, nerves no longer send messages to the brain because of a break down in the myelin sheath covering it. However, patients pretended the copper wire was a nerve and visualized it as whole and sending a message to their brain.

"It's difficult to track the power of the brain. We don't know exactly just how powerful it is, but we do know that there are spontaneous remissions. For example, we know some people have a tumor one day and it's gone the next," says Rodgers. "It's difficult to document what happened. But it is time that health care professionals took notice that 'Mind Over MS' is working."

And the medical community in Tulsa is doing just that. Dr. Barbara Hastings specializes in neurology at the Neurological Institute at St. John Medical Center. After reviewing Rodgers' results and talking with patients, Hastings was so impressed with Rodgers' program, she now refers her MS patients to classes.

"Since mood changes affect MS, the mind has a strong influence over the disease. Patients, who

are not as anxious and stay involved in the mainstream, have a better quality of life," says Dr. Hastings. "The power of the mind is real hard to measure, but for some of my tougher-to-solve cases, I've seen a veil lifted from the patients."

Hastings disagrees with Rodgers, however, when it comes to naming this mind power. Rodgers calls it an "alternative" to traditional medicine. Hastings calls it helpful.

"I don't think it's an alternative to traditional treatment. Mind over matter can't actually stop the disease. I don't think it is that powerful," says Hastings. "MS patients have a hyper-immune system; their system is over-reactive. The mind can make it not so active and reduce the stresses that trigger new attacks."

Regardless of the name, it's getting the attention and money of many Americans and medical experts. Rodgers says last year in the U.S., one out of every three people used alternative methods of medicine, spending more than \$14 billion for those therapies. Half of all U.S. medical schools teach about mind-body connections.

Mary Ann O'Dell of Akins Health Foods supports alternative medicine as another choice for patients.

"Why use steroids that can cause serious side effects when you can use alternative methods with fewer side effects and get the same benefits," asks O'Dell who holds a masters of science degree as a registered dietitian. "But, I always tell customers to talk with their doctors first. Some doctors are very cautious of alternative medicine. Others are open to it."

O'Dell says MS patients benefit from taking B-complex vitamins, taking a combination of flax seed and primrose oil, eating no refined sugar and drinking fresh fruit and vegetable juices.

This new partnership between alternative medicine and traditional treatment is encouraging for Susan and the more than 300,000 Americans and 2,500 Oklahomans who battle with MS daily. MS is a progressive degenerative disease that attacks the central nervous system. Victims often experience overwhelming fatigue, slurred speech, blindness and difficulty walking. Some patients are so weak they can't even tie their shoes or zip their pants.

"My work often took me into the courthouse. One day I was weaving in and out the courthouse. One of my co-workers told my boss I was drunk," recalls Susan. "At that time, I had to come out of the closet and tell them I wasn't drunk. I had MS."

Since then Susan has quit her job. Her symptoms first started in 1977. She experienced tingling in her arms and numbness in her legs. In 1987, doctors at the Mayo Clinic officially diagnosed

Susan with MS. Susan began traditional medical treatment which included chemotherapy and taking experimental drugs, such as betaseron, which is supposed to lessen the frequency and severity of attacks. Susan says the side-effects put her in the wheelchair and gave her flu-like symptoms. That's when she decided to try alternative medicine.

"I can't describe the joy, happiness and peace I feel," says Susan. "I feel as if I'm in control rather than being a helpless victim waiting for MS to pull its next act."

"I had already met Susan and watched her health decline," recalls Rodgers. "It was just killing me to see her suffer. When she first started our program, she was in a wheelchair. Now she walks with a walker that can't move fast enough to keep up with her."

Other patients with similar diseases are seeking out professionals who believe in mind power. At age 28, Maggie Scribner was diagnosed with scleroderma, an auto-immune disease that hardens the skin and internal organs, such as the lungs and kidneys. She often sees a psychologist who hypnotizes her and gives her mind suggestions for fighting the symptoms.

"I'm a very visual person. But, I needed to learn how to mentally calm myself and my disease," says Maggie. "With scleroderma, I freeze even when it's 75 degrees outside. My hands often go numb from the cold, even just holding a cold pop can. Through imagination, I've learned to think warm and increase the blood flow to my hands. To do that, I think about a roaring fire in a fireplace."

"When I'm stressed at work, I think about the rippling water in my grandmother's stream on the farm. It brings me peace. I'm definitely a believer in the power of the mind."

Due to such positive feedback and the success of the study, Rodgers is planning more programs designed to expand the techniques offered in the first trial study. She plans to set up specific studies for such diseases as AIDS, cancer and Alzheimer's.

As for Susan, she's planning a trip next year to Idaho. She's pitching the walker and picking up a pair of skis.

"I used to ski circles around my sister, but I was so bad the last time I went I just gave up and went to sit and listen to the band!" says Susan laughing. "But, now I'm ready to try it again."

Editor's Note: For more information about participating in a study contact Denise Rodgers at (918) 743-9492 or write to 6218 S. Lewis, Suite 114, Tulsa, 74136.



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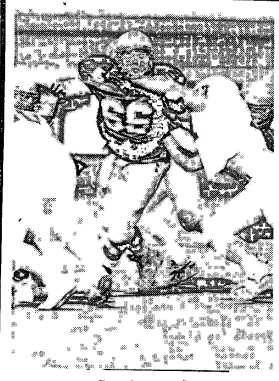
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