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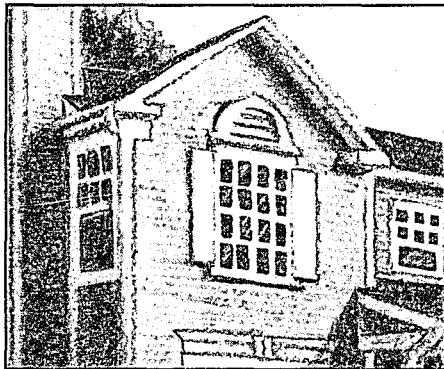
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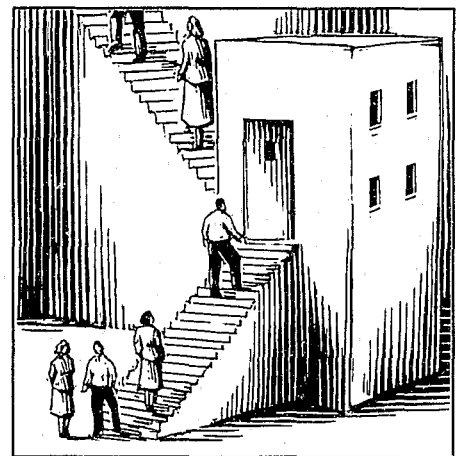
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Holistic Health Comes to Prison

Tracy Thompson

Maria stopped in her tracks, noticing the onset of the first stages of the panic attack that usually preceded her seizures. Her heart was beating rapidly, and she felt afraid. She began to regulate her breathing and tried to connect with the feeling of being centered and grounded.

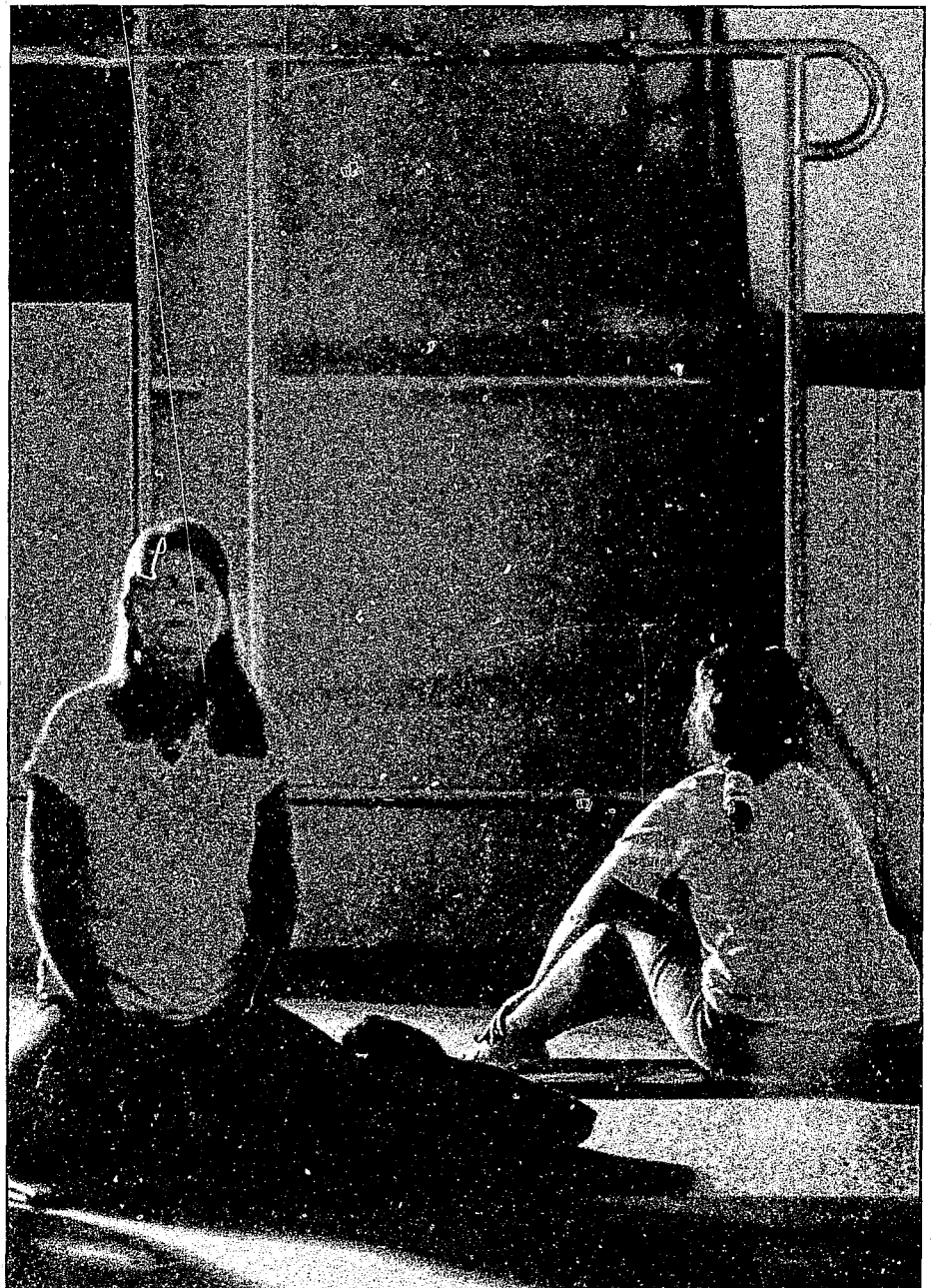
She turned to her friend Rosa and asked for help. Rosa saw at once what Maria needed and began to speak calmly, instructing her to focus on her breathing and concentrate on staying fully present in her body. As contractions passed through Maria's body, Rosa stayed with her. The seizure passed quickly, and Maria gradually regained consciousness without any of the fear and distress that usually accompanied her seizures. She felt grateful for Rosa's help and for the breathing and centering techniques they had both learned in the prison's holistic health program.

This is but one of the success stories of the Prison Integrated Health Program (PIHP), serving the entire prison population—both inmates and staff—at the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI), Dublin, California. This innovative volunteer program began in 1990 as a stress management workshop for 20 long-term inmates. The program was taught by Kathy Park, an artist and somatic education teacher, under my supervision as Clinical Director of Health Services. From a two-session stress management workshop taught by one volunteer, the holistic health program at Dublin has expanded dramatically in the years since.

The volunteer organization Prison Integrated Health Program was created by its co-directors in spring 1991 to bring together teachers (along with community resources) to develop comprehensive holistic health programming for FCI

Dublin and to serve as a model for a new approach to health promotion and disease prevention in correctional facilities.

Meditation workshops, which help reduce stress, are part of the Prison Integrated Health Program.



Central to the program is the belief that health is a function of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being; only by addressing all aspects of people's lives through a holistic approach can we change behavior, prevent disease, reduce symptoms, and promote health. PIHP has developed the first holistic health program in a Federal women's prison. It has already inspired the creation of similar programming in several other jails and prisons nationwide.

PIHP is co-directed by volunteers Kathy Park and Wendy Palmer, who is a teacher of meditation, conflict resolution, and intuition. Its core teaching staff currently consists of five facilitators, an auxiliary staff of 25, and many guest speakers—all volunteers. PIHP is a sponsored project of the San Francisco Women's Centers, a nonprofit organization. It is independently funded by individual donations and foundation grants and has received many in-kind donations of books, tapes, and art supplies. PIHP has also assembled a national advisory board of professionals concerned with holistic health issues, including renowned authors George Leonard (*Mystery*) and Clarissa Pinkola Estes (*Women Who Run With the Wolves*).

Women inmates' many stressors

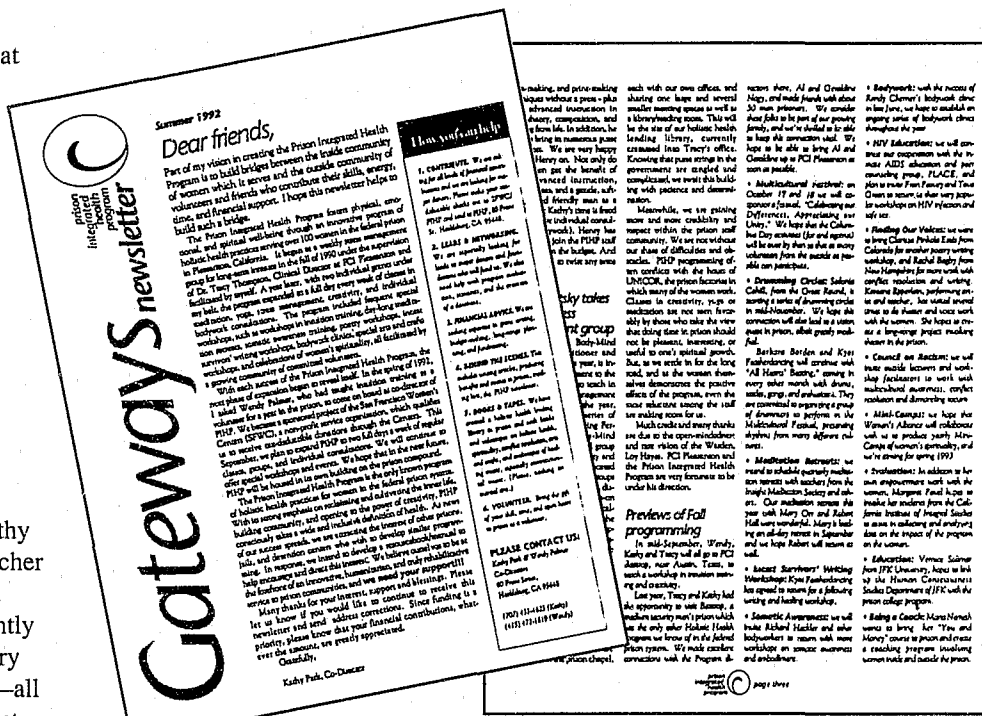
PIHP arose out of a need for a fresh, creative approach to prison health problems resulting from chronic stress and exacerbated by overcrowding, limited resources, and "bandaid" or symptom-oriented solutions. These stressors adversely affect both inmates

and staff, as well as their families. Research in the new field of psychoneuroimmunology gives credence to the holistic approach: it has illuminated the many ways in which chronic stress erodes health while demonstrating that holistic approaches can diminish the damage wrought by stress.

Women prisoners must cope with multiple stressors and are at particular risk for health problems. In a national survey of women in correctional facilities, more than 40 percent report previous sexual or physical abuse. More than 50 percent report histories of substance abuse. More than 75 percent are mothers.¹ Because there are only seven Federal women's prisons (and only two house high-security women), most mothers are incarcerated great distances from their children, families, and in many cases, their countries. Visits are few. Women of various cultures, ethnicities, and classes are mixed in cramped

quarters, resulting in conflict and impairing both individual and community health. (A third of FCI Dublin's population of 850 is Hispanic, a third is white, and a third is African or African-American, while a small number are Asian, Middle Eastern, or Native American.) In addition, many Hispanic inmates have difficulty communicating in English and feel estranged in a foreign culture.

More than two thirds of the inmates at FCI Dublin suffer from such chronic problems as hypertension, heart disease, asthma, chronic pain syndromes (e.g., headaches; neck, back, or other musculoskeletal pain; and pelvic pain), gastrointestinal disease (gastritis, peptic ulcer disease, irritable bowel syndrome), and infectious diseases (more than 80 have been infected with Hepatitis C).



The PIHP newsletter circulates to volunteers and other outside supporters.



Tracy Thompson (second from right) talks with teacher Richard Strozzi Heckler, Ph.D. (second from left) and other PIHP volunteers.

Psychological problems include depression, addictive behavior, insomnia, post-traumatic-stress syndrome, and adjustment disorders. In any given week, 260 or more may be seen for sick call, emergencies, or injuries, while as many as 200 may come in to be seen by the physicians. Many common medical and emotional problems in the inmate population are exacerbated, if not caused, by stress.

Inmates participating in PIHP identify their most intense stressors as separation from family, overcrowding, lack of privacy, work, racial tension, the threat of violence, and lack of creative outlets. They also complain of anxiety, hopelessness, depression, low self-esteem, frustration, anger, alienation, sadness, loneliness, and bitterness.²

Prison staff suffer from such stressors as overcrowding, tight budgets, and perceived understaffing. These chronic stressors often result in family conflicts and impaired health, which negatively affect prison conditions. Although many staff benefit from support programs and groups, there has not been, until now, any attempt at a holistic approach.

Creating a healthy community

Instead of "bandaid" solutions, PIHP offers inmates and staff comprehensive parallel programming to promote health and prevent disease. PIHP's philosophy is to create a healthy community by encouraging individuals to take charge of their own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It offers inmates 30 hours a week of classes in meditation, conflict resolution, stress management, somatic education,³ parenting skills, and

creative expression in fine arts, voice, and crafts, all of which enhance integration of mind, body, and spirit, and create a supportive community within the prison setting. A special project of PIHP, the Council on Racism, is working to dismantle racism among prisoners, improve inmates' communication skills, and promote tolerance and appreciation for the cultural diversity found at FCI Dublin.

In addition, PIHP offers inmates individual consultations, special workshops, and cultural events. In fall 1991, PIHP sponsored a day-long celebration of women's spirituality entitled "The Spiritual Path of Imprisonment: The Quest for Inner Freedom." A year later, PIHP and the Council on Racism

cosponsored a festival with the theme "Celebrating Our Differences: Appreciating Our Unity." For 2 days, the prison enjoyed workshops, wonderful ethnic food, cultural displays, and live performances from talented outside artists and from the inmates themselves. The festival drew a record-breaking 90-percent attendance on the evening of inmate performances and helped instill hope, pride, and appreciation of the diverse groups that make up the prison community.

The intention behind PIHP programming for inmates is to support them in successfully handling the challenges of incarceration, parole, and reintegration into society as responsible, motivated, and caring individuals. It encourages them to redefine their goals; to work with their anger, bitterness, and other dysfunctional patterns; and to support one another in the difficult process of change.

FCI Dublin's Health Services Department has reported a significant improvement in the health and well-being of PIHP inmate participants over the last 3 years. Inmates in the original long-term stress group have reduced their use of medication for chronic pain and stress-related disease by more than 50 percent. We have also seen positive changes in more recent participants:

- Many have stopped smoking, improved their diets, and begun practicing more skillful ways of expressing negative feelings.

- Many, including those previously dependent on antidepressant medication, have embraced meditation as a dis-

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cipline through which to handle life's difficulties.

- They also demonstrate more effective communication and leadership skills, and more tolerance, understanding, and compassion.

- Many have begun a process of reconciliation by opening up communication with loved ones on the outside.

- Participants themselves report improvements in health, well-being, and self-esteem; at least two PIHP graduates have gone on to serve in the fields of social work and substance-abuse counseling.

For staff, PIHP programming promotes alternative methods of coping with stress and offers education in relaxation techniques, somatic awareness, conflict resolution and meditation, multicultural diversity, team-building, parenting skills, and preventive health care. For Health Services Department staff, meditation has helped reduce intradepartmental conflict and tension, and has contributed

to a redefining of the department's mission, thereby making the work environment healthier and permitting staff to provide more effective service to inmates.

Funding has been committed for a new combined chapel/holistic health unit that will house PIHP and its lending library. The library, which has been put together entirely by donations from publishers, community libraries, and individuals, is an extensive collection of books, journals, and audiotapes in the fields of health, spirituality, women's issues, meditation, yoga, and personal growth and transformation.

Building on success

Many forces have combined to make PIHP successful. The enthusiasm of PIHP volunteers has gone a long way to reduce the loneliness, isolation, and alienation felt by many inmates. In addition, volunteers are empowered by the opportunity to be of service and come away from prison with a fresh perspective on problems in their own lives. PIHP has flourished at FCI Dublin due to consistent support by the administration, which is dedicated to finding new ways to improve the health of the whole prison community.

Essential to the program is the belief that *change is possible*: we can all learn to take responsibility for our own health and healing. We can develop insight into dysfunctional behaviors, and develop confidence to make positive changes. By encouraging such change, and by working with both sides of the equation, we can transform the health of the prison community. (Not incidentally, such a transformation can significantly reduce

expenditures for diagnosis and treatment of chronic health problems, as well as serve as a passive security device.)

In February 1993, the Holistic Health Committee was created at FCI Dublin to bring together all departments in support of the mission to improve the physical, mental, and spiritual health of staff and inmates. The Committee includes department heads from Health Services, Psychology, Religious Services, Education, and Recreation; a director of PIHP; the institution's volunteer coordinator; a union representative; and the warden and associate wardens. The Committee coordinates all holistic health activities and may soon develop an evaluation component for the program.

The experience of many behavioral-medicine/holistic health programs throughout the country has been well documented.⁴ It is now widely accepted that mental and emotional factors—the ways we behave and our beliefs about our ability to affect our own health—significantly influence not just our sense of well-being, but also our ability to adapt to, or recover from, illness or injury. What is new is bringing this model to the prison setting.

In addition, the creation of a community that supports understanding and respect is a powerful antidote to the toxic loneliness, alienation, and hostility that commonly afflict prison populations. A recent study of women with metastatic breast cancer demonstrated that creation of a support community, by itself, doubled survival rates; studies of support groups for people with AIDS have also reported positively on the healing efficacy of supportive communities. The



Inmates receive a dance lesson from community volunteer Karen Hunt during the fall 1992 multicultural festival.

Holistic Health Program and PIHP at FCI Dublin support the creation of such a cohesive community and encourage participants, inmates, staff, and volunteers to explore new ways of being with self and others. While the program is still young, there are many individual success stories that hold promise for the future. ■

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Notes

¹Statistics from American College of Physicians position paper: "The Crisis in Correctional Health Care: The Impact of the National Drug Control Strategy on Correctional Health Services," 1992.

²From a survey of 70 participants in the Prison Integrated Health Program in fall and winter 1992.

³Somatic education, or bodywork, is a methodology for working through the body to facilitate mind/body/spirit integration.

⁴See, for example, Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* (New York: Delta, 1990), an account of the program of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Other recent additions to the field of mind/body medicine are Bill Moyers, *Healing and the Mind* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) and Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., and Joel Gurin, eds., *Mind Body Medicine: How to Use Your Mind for Better Health* (Yonkers: Consumer Reports Books, 1993).