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SPIRITUAL HEALTH // MEDICAL PROFILES // Q&A WITH NEW LEAF'S REX STEWART



Above, a Chartist-style labyrinth inlaid in stone was dedicated earlier this year as a sacred space at Stillheart.

Below, Mark Takata of El Granada uses tuning forks for sound and vibrational healing.

BY LILY BIXLER | PHOTOS BY LARS HOWLETT

The other side of health

Local spiritualists discuss the art of healing

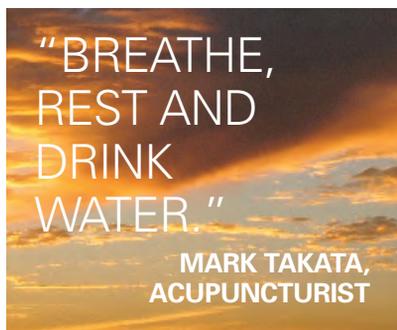
Sitting cross-legged on pillows, a group of six people, with calm temperaments and softened eyes, sits in a circle with a glowing candle, tarot cards and mugs of tea scattered about.

The group encircles a larger bed of pillows on which members will take turns lying, while the others funnel their concentrated energy toward the individual in the center. "The idea is to be in touch with your heart," explained Laurel Lewis, who learned this meditation ritual during a trip to Thailand and is visiting Stillheart Institute, a sanctuary and educational center off of Skyline Boulevard.

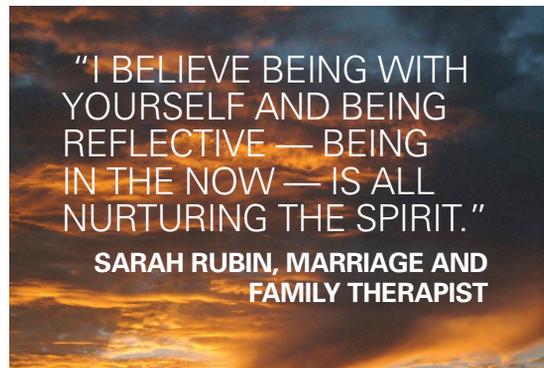
Lewis is one of roughly 38 percent of American adults who use complementary and alternative medicine approaches such as meditation, yoga and acupuncture, according to a 2007 study from the National Institute of Health.

Physical health is often thought to be about blood pressure, hormone levels, weight and other markers of physical

well-being. While spiritual health, on the other hand, focuses on emotional and spiritual vitality. Some shun the bifurcated view of physical versus spiritual health and instead think in terms of a holistic condition where caring for



A large Brazilian crystal greets guests arriving at the Stillheart Institute, where stones and geodes help to focus energies.



the spirit is integral to the healing process.

Perhaps the epitome of mind-body connection — and modern theme song for alternative health — is yoga. The ancient meditative discipline isn't just about stretchy pants and funny poses. Yoga has five pillars: movement, breathing, eating, relaxation and positive thinking. Ultimately the practice of yoga is the admittance that we have a soul, said Enso yoga teacher and Half Moon Bay resident Courtney Woodrow. "The physical body has to be well to carry out the soul's journey," she said.

What fuels that journey, Woodrow explained, is the breath. Can you keep a balanced breath while going through all of these strengthening poses? What about while zipping through a busy super-market?

El Granada-based acupuncturist Mark Takata echoed Woodrow's concern with staying centered during stressful times, noting how, as a society, we're moving way too fast and spiraling out of balance. Takata uses acupuncture, an "energy medium" that utilizes needles, touch and sound to help induce healing in the body. However, Takata doesn't consider himself a healer; for him that's a process that needs to happen internally. "For healing to really take place, the physical, spiritual and emotional need to be addressed," he said.

People often come to Takata after trying traditional Western medicine to no avail. Takata's favored approach is integrated medicine, or what he describes as collaborating all forms of medicine — traditional Western medicine with centuries-old Eastern healing practices like yoga, meditation and, of course, acupuncture.

As far as spirituality goes, Takata suggests keeping things simple. "Breathe and get present," he said.

To heal the mind and body, people also turn to qigong, neuroemotional technique, hypnosis, therapeutic massage, biofeedback and flower essence therapy. Another route is good, old-fashioned psychotherapy.

Coastside marriage and family therapist Sarah Rubin focuses on art therapy. Rubin specialized in teenagers as well as addiction. In her office in downtown Half Moon Bay, two sand trays are set up for her patients to use during their therapy.

Youths and some adults seen by therapist Sarah Rubin create worlds and play out scenarios in sand trays that can provide interesting insight into subconscious ideas and memories.





During the sessions, young patients play in the sand with little figurines while Rubin watches as part of her diagnostic process.

Rubin describes the sand trays, play therapy, narrative therapy, art therapy and traditional talk therapy all as “symbolic languages to access the conscious.” Making art, she said, brings the individual out of the intellectual and back into the body.

Her patients use art therapy, in particular, “to externalize the internal process.” The approach was born out of occupational therapy, but the healing practice really emerged as a profession in the 1940s when psychiatrists became interested in the artwork created by patients with mental illness.

“It’s often thought of as airy fairy,” conceded Rubin. “It’s taken a long time to get the backing of the scientific community.”

Something Rubin notices about her young patients is that they aren’t encour-

“SPIRITUAL HEALTH IS ABOUT RIDDING THE BODY OF NEGATIVE INFLUENCES — LIKE PHYSICAL TOXINS AND EMOTIONAL STRESS — THAT STOP YOU FROM LIVING IN A PLACE OF LOVE AND TRUTH.”

COURTNEY WOODROW,
YOGA TEACHER

aged to pause and reflect. “Sitting with your feelings is healing,” she said. “We use so much technology — texting and Facebook — and the art taps into a space

Acupuncture is one of the primary healing tools that Mark Takata utilizes in his El Granada studio.

particular to you that feels more authentic,” she said.

The power of reflection was evident several years ago. Rubin was working with a troubled boy who was retaking the eighth grade after the first time around. When he first came into Rubin’s office, tears would inexplicably pour from his eyes but he would show no affect. “He’d just be talking and tears would be rolling down his face,” but when asked why he was crying he said he wasn’t and that this just always happened to him. After working with him for about six months, Rubin said his emotions were no longer pent up inside. He began to talk about his feelings, and he even improved in school.

“I believe being with yourself and being reflective — being in the now — is all nurturing the spirit,” she said. “As a therapist, I provide (patients) a safe space to do that and let down their guard allowing them the space to be in touch with their psyche.” ✨