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Parents of children with serious medical problems rarely have a spare moment to think about anything beyond seeking out the best care for their child, let alone taking a deep breath and relaxing for a little while.

But Penni Feiner and Geri Topfer of Kula Care have been offering them exactly that—a chance to step outside their everyday world for a moment by practicing yoga. And it can be very powerful, Penni and Geri say, recalling a session they led at Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC). “We created a safe space, which enabled the mothers and fathers to take a deep breath, let go, and experience the emotions they were holding in their hearts,” says Penni. “Tears were flowing.”

Kula Care has been bringing healing through yoga to HUMC patients, their families, and hospital staff for more than three years. Kula Care, a grassroots, non-profit organization provides therapeutic yoga, mindfulness meditation, chanting, and breathing exercises. They offer accessible user-friendly tools for stress management to support those who have been challenged by illness, disabilities, violence and other traumas.

Kula Care is a community of volunteer certified yoga instructors. For a child recovering after a bone marrow transplant, instructors will wear a sterile mask and gown, and may simply sit bedside with the child, dim the lights, and offer breathing exercises, music, and guided meditation.

“There’s a beautiful sea of people with different needs,” says Penni. “Our teachers are trained to be able to manage all possibilities.”

The goal, Penni and Geri say, is to empower patients to manage pain that may cause stress and depression. Their sessions allow each patient to reconnect to his or her mind, body, and spirit. Kula Care runs programs for children and teens with epilepsy, cancer, gastrointestinal disorders, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, and rheumatism. Adult programs include cancer patients, caring for the



Gerri Topfer (left) and Penni Feiner of Kula Care lead yoga and meditation sessions for HUMC patients, their families, and hospital staff.

caregivers, and Cure and Beyond, a program for cancer survivors after chemotherapy and radiation.

Penni and Geri started out at HUMC working with pediatric oncology and pediatric ICU patients. Some of the children can’t get out of bed, so sessions may happen at the patient’s bedside, or in a small conference room, with just one or two mobile children and sometimes their families. They like to tell the story of one of their early patients, a 21-year-old woman who brought her family and her IV pole, which she’d dubbed “Cleopatra.” Or the young teen with learning disabilities who was not only having medical problems, but also had a very difficult time focusing and concentrating. After doing a special meditation for focusing the mind through movement, the staff commented on his sense of tranquility and stillness.

A session might involve helping a patient who is feeling weak to begin to move his or her limbs. Showing them how to bring energy back to their arms by circling their wrists and tapping up one side of the arm and down the other sounds simple, but is extremely powerful, Penni says. And for patients who have been feeling helpless, she adds, it can have a huge impact, helping them to understand that they can be involved in their own healing process.

Adds Geri, “What we’re offering are portable tools.” Learning skills for coping with pain, anxiety, and depression, she

explains, equips a person with a “toolbox of self-care.”

Gerri and Penni ran a program for sickle cell patients and their families that drew 50 people, from three-year-olds to a 90-year-old grandfather. “What we’re finding is that the buzz is reverberating through the hospital, and different departments are asking for it,” says Geri. “We’re excited because the medical community is finally embracing what we’re doing.”

Kula Care is also available to patients and family members after hospital discharge, and Penni and Geri run a variety of workshops in New Jersey and beyond. The word “Kula” means “community,” they point out, which they say is a crucial part of what they offer to the people they teach.

This year they would like to roll out a quarterly workshop at HUMC for parents of children in the hospital, focused on integrative approaches to healing. “Parents are hungry for information, and feel isolated. They’re basically getting through the day, so to be able to turn to an available community is crucial to their healing process,” Geri says.

She adds, “Penni and I always talk about how we may not be the best chanters or breathers, but what we do best is create a safe place for people just to be.”

For more information on Kula Care, please call 866-787-6822.