Welcome to Yale Cancer Answers with your host Doctor Anees Chagpar. Yale Cancer Answers features the latest information on cancer care by welcoming oncologists and specialists who are on the forefront of the battle to fight cancer. This week, it’s a conversation about Integrative Medicine and the challenges of dealing with cancer during the pandemic with Doctor Gary Soffer. Doctor Soffer is the director of the Integrative Medicine Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital and an assistant professor of clinical Pediatrics at the Yale School of Medicine where doctor Chagpar is a professor of surgical oncology. Gary, maybe we can start off by you telling us a little bit more about yourself and what exactly you do. Sure, and it’s funny, I always start my integrative medicine appointments with, tell me about yourself, and the patients tend to
dive into their cancer diagnosis. So I correct them and I'm going to avoid that. I'm going to say I'm a father of two. We live in Connecticut and I enjoy things like yoga and meditation and I love my job. But I will talk about what people are probably a little more interested in, which is what I actually do. I specialize in something called Integrative Medicine, and I also specialize in something called allergy and immunology. I think for awhile people saw this as a strange combination, but as COVID was coming up I think the conversations about Integrative Medicine and immunology are becoming more and more prevalent, so it’s giving me an interesting space to talk about these things. Maybe dive a little bit more into what exactly is integrative medicine. I think it’s one of these terms that might be a little confusing to people. Yeah, it’s a little confusing to me to be quite honest, and it really does depend on where you look, and I think each individual
practitioner of Integrative Medicine, for better or for worse, sort of has their own take on it. But the way I see it is that integrative medicine just simply incorporates into conventional care and what kept people healthy before the advent of modern medicine and all these wonderful things that we have and bringing that in and reminding ourselves these things did have value and they had importance. And then the other thing that we really think about is what is the least invasive way to make a patient feel better? And sometimes it’s about helping the cancer, but sometimes it’s just also about changing the journey and changing how they feel about their disease and how they experience their disease day to day. I mean the least invasive way to make somebody feel better might be not to treat a cancer with things like surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy, but it sounds like that’s not really where you’re at? I’m speaking to the patient and respecting their autonomy and understanding where they’re coming from.
I’m on the side of conventional medicine in the sense that I believe in my heart that is the best cure for cancer, but sometimes that’s not what the patient is looking for and we have to understand that and we have to have that conversation. And it’s important to ask the question of why do patients seek out integrative medicine? What are they looking for? And it’s easy to say, well, they’re looking for more natural options, and that’s true to a certain degree, but I think what we also have to understand is that they’re looking for autonomy. They’re looking for a way to participate in their care, and so if they do their research and they find some herb that their doctor didn’t tell them about, well, that makes him feel empowered. It makes him feel a part of their care, and part of integrated medicine is giving the patients those tools and techniques in a safe way. That they can participate in their care and they don’t just have to sit back and get the chemotherapy treatment.
done to them.

I totally get that.

And I think the other thing is that when you talk to patients and you ask them why are they seeking out integrative care?

A lot of times it’s because conventional care is scary, because chemotherapy is scary. People don’t want to feel sick. They don’t want to feel nauseous. And I think that oftentimes I find that integrative care can actually help people to get through conventional treatments and get over that fear that helps them to get through that journey.

There’s a concept in Tibetan Buddhism called Dukkha and Dukkha roughly translates into suffering, but I really hate that translation and what I think it really means is feeling unsettled and this feeling of just constant stimulation in our head and this chatter that keeps going and going and going. And am I going to feel horrible?

Am I going to feel nauseous?

And what I try to remind them is at the anticipation of getting a shot or getting a needle is just so much worse than the needle itself.
And that’s not to diminish the sensations or the experiences that people have while on chemotherapy. But integrative medicine really can help in changing how we sort of view it, how we experience it, and how we approach all of these experiences. And let’s unpack a little bit about that. So you know cancer is a scary diagnosis for anybody, no matter how strong you think you are deep down inside, everybody is a little bit fearful of not only the diagnosis but the treatment and the prognosis. So how do you use integrative medicine to get people to settle that unsettled feeling? I mean, we have lots of different techniques and obviously the things that come to mind, are mindfulness and yoga, but every patient is different and every patient needs to find that thing that does it for them. So I have patients who knit and that’s a mindfulness exercise, but we don’t really think about it that way, or drawing or coloring,
0:07:09.702 –> 0:07:12.07 or just finding ways to be present.
0:07:14.4 –> 0:07:16.62 And that’s so important,
0:07:16.62 –> 0:07:18.816 but what about people who kind
0:07:18.816 –> 0:07:20.69 of have difficulty with that?
0:07:20.69 –> 0:07:22.91 because I think that
0:07:22.91 –> 0:07:24.666 oftentimes in mindfulness practice,
0:07:24.666 –> 0:07:28.06 people tell you to kind of focus on
0:07:28.06 –> 0:07:30.44 the present and be present and focus
0:07:30.44 –> 0:07:33.265 on the breath and so on and so forth.
0:07:33.27 –> 0:07:36.238 But for many patients I can just imagine
0:07:36.238 –> 0:07:39.189 that you know their head is going to spin,
0:07:39.19 –> 0:07:41.41 I just was diagnosed with cancer,
0:07:41.41 –> 0:07:44.45 I’ve got a doctors appointment in three days.
0:07:44.45 –> 0:07:46.736 My test results are coming back.
0:07:46.74 –> 0:07:49.422 I have to think about
0:07:49.422 –> 0:07:51.352 my next chemotherapy and on
0:07:51.352 –> 0:07:53.24 top of all of that,
0:07:53.24 –> 0:07:54.768 especially now we’re living
0:07:54.768 –> 0:07:57.06 in this crazy world of Covid,
0:07:57.06 –> 0:07:59.346 so I’m worried about my kids
0:07:59.346 –> 0:08:00.108 getting infected.
0:08:00.11 –> 0:08:03.47 I’m worried about home schooling or whether
0:08:03.47 –> 0:08:06.856 they should go to school and how that
0:08:06.856 –> 0:08:10.128 affects me and all of that chatter.
0:08:12.04 –> 0:08:13.795 It just might be difficult
0:08:13.795 –> 0:08:16.23 to be mindful.
0:08:16.23 –> 0:08:18.882 So what tips do you have
0:08:18.882 –> 0:08:21.06 for people to
0:08:21.06 –> 0:08:23.016 settle that unsettled feeling?
0:08:23.67 –> 0:08:25.295 First of all, anybody who
0:08:25.295 –> 0:08:26.595 tells you they’re a good
Meditator is a liar. It’s hard work, and it’s called a practice for a reason. It’s because we’re constantly striving for a little bit better. There’s a concept in mindfulness and meditation that I talk to a lot of my patients about. Which is we can’t control the first thought. Whatever pops into your head is human. It’s natural, whatever comes into your mind is there. What we have control over is the second thought, and that’s where the practice of mindfulness comes in. That’s where we learn to exercise our brains in a way that say, the first thought came in, but where’s the second thought going to take me? Where are we going to go with this? This isn’t a band aid. It’s not a quick and easy fix, it takes work and it takes practice and ideally all of my patients have been meditating for years before they get the diagnosis. But let’s be honest, the moment that they start to explore these ideas and think about
them and see the value in them is truly is when they’re struggling and when they’re suffering and so we have to meet them there. And I can just imagine that it may be difficult, especially when you’re thinking about everything else that’s going on in the world now, to try to practice mindfulness. I mean, it’s just one more thing and that might not be your thing, and that’s sort of the beauty of Integrative Medicine is we have so many different tools in our toolbox to bring patients to that place and it may just not be about sitting cross legged some place. It may just be simply about going for a walk without your cell phone. That’s a pretty mindful activity, but people don’t think about it like that, So it’s about looking at your patients, seeing what their value system is, seeing what’s important to them and reminding them of that because it gets so lost all of a sudden you get a diagnosis and your medical record number and you’re the next patient on the doctors schedule and you have 15
0:10:31.827 –> 0:10:33.969 minutes to ask whatever you want to
0:10:33.969 –> 0:10:36.629 ask your doctor and you forgot 12 of
0:10:36.629 –> 0:10:38.866 the questions you wanted to ask and
0:10:38.866 –> 0:10:41.537 then you leave and then you show up
0:10:41.537 –> 0:10:44.385 the next day and you get your chemotherapy.
0:10:44.39 –> 0:10:47.197 And nobody knows your name and nobody
0:10:47.197 –> 0:10:51.14 knows who you are and it can be a
0:10:51.14 –> 0:10:52.908 very depersonalizing experience when
0:10:52.988 –> 0:10:55.638 your entire experience is unique,
0:10:55.64 –> 0:10:58.867 what you’re feeling is so unique
0:10:58.867 –> 0:11:01.412 and so independent.
0:11:02.234 –> 0:11:04.7 And you treat patients with breast cancer
0:11:04.781 –> 0:11:07.812 and you know every patient with breast
0:11:07.812 –> 0:11:10.489 cancer experiences it differently, their
0:11:10.49 –> 0:11:11.84 pathology, their genetics,
0:11:11.84 –> 0:11:14.54 everything might be identical on paper,
0:11:14.54 –> 0:11:15.876 but who they are,
0:11:15.876 –> 0:11:17.546 how they experience their disease
0:11:17.546 –> 0:11:19.059 is completely unique,
0:11:19.06 –> 0:11:21.426 and so I’m not going to prescribe
0:11:21.426 –> 0:11:22.44 mindfulness to everybody.
0:11:22.44 –> 0:11:23.454 I certainly don’t,
0:11:24.13 –> 0:11:26.834 I think it’s the wrong decision for people,
0:11:26.84 –> 0:11:29.479 but there are certain patients who it
0:11:29.479 –> 0:11:32.102 works well with and the reason why we
0:11:32.102 –> 0:11:34.95 like it so much is going back to
0:11:35.626 –> 0:11:37.316 this original concept of is
0:11:37.316 –> 0:11:38.33 this invasive?
0:11:38.33 –> 0:11:40.02 It’s not really that invasive.
0:11:40.02 –> 0:11:41.034 Is this safe?
0:11:41.034 –> 0:11:43.43 It is safe,
It’s generally not a harmful practice for patients, and so it’s a really helpful tool in the toolbox, but it’s not the only one and the integrative medicine, as you say, has got so many tools in the toolbox, some of which are really kind of mindfulness based. But others are things that may stem from other ancient practices. So I can imagine things like complementary therapies with herbal supplements or acupuncture or acupressure. How do all of these other modalities play into a cancer patient’s journey as well? So again, it’s about meeting patients where they are and what they are. Their hopes and expectations and what they want out of this. We have a lot of success with certain patients with acupuncture. Neuropathic patients who haven’t been able to find anything else to help treat that pain or that discomfort. That’s really helpful. I also find that finding a patient’s tradition and where they come from and their roots
is also really meaningful. So oftentimes I will talk to patients of Indian descent and talk about Ayurveda because that’s what their grandmother did and that grounds them. It roots them in something and on top of that, there are certainly certain herbs that come from Ayurveda that have been shown to be helpful in certain patients. Boswellia, for example, is a pretty safe herb to give patients and it can be helpful and they’re looking for something like that. I think that concept of really meeting people where they are and letting them experience their journey and participate in their journey is so important. We’re going to learn a lot more from about how to deal with cancer, particularly during these Covid times, right after we take a short break for a medical minute. Support for Yale Cancer Answers comes from AstraZeneca. A science led biopharmaceutical company dedicated to partnering across the oncology community to improve outcomes across various stages of cancer.
This is a medical minute about genetic testing which can be useful for people with certain types of cancer that seem to run in their families. Patients that are considered at risk receive genetic counseling and testing so informed medical decisions can be based on their own personal risk assessment. Resources for genetic counseling and testing are available at federally designated comprehensive cancer centers. Interdisciplinary teams include geneticists, genetic counselors, physicians, and nurses who work together to provide risk assessment and steps to prevent the development of cancer. More information is available at yalecancercenter.org. You’re listening to Connecticut public radio. Welcome back to Yale Cancer Answers. This is doctor Anees Chagpar. I’m joined tonight by my guest doctor Gary Soffer. We are talking about dealing with cancer, particularly during the times of Covid and how integrative medicine can really help with that. Gary, before the break we were talking about cancer in general,
being a really scary diagnosis and how integrative medicine can really help to meet patients where they are in that journey, and make it just a little bit more tolerable. But I can imagine that particularly now during Covid it’s worse. What are you seeing from patients in terms of how they are coping with this? They might not be able to see their doctor face to face without a computer screen in between them. They may have had their therapies delayed. I can imagine that what is normally a stressful experience just got a whole lot more stressful.

You know, it’s interesting. I mentioned to you before that I see pediatric allergy and immunology patients in addition to my work at Smilow in integrative medicine. Cancer patients are really in a unique struggle right now and there is very real and practical concerns about their immune system being suppressed from their chemotherapy. The added loneliness that we talked about with cancer can be isolating. There’s an added loneliness because now you’re socially
isolating from people, but I also find that many of my allergy immunology patients are doing worse because they haven’t quite explored these greater esoteric questions that our cancer patients have. They haven’t been forced to explore what it means when you’re body isn’t working in your favor. And sure they have their own conditions and their own diseases, but for the most part, the quality of life that they are experiencing is very, very different. You know our cancer patients have been through that journey to a certain degree, so sometimes it’s just simply reminding them of what they’ve already persevered through and that this is simply a part of that journey. It’s a mixed bag and there’s no good answer. I will say this, we’ve started doing things almost completely virtually in integrative medicine. I was pretty reluctant at the beginning to do that.
Integrative medicine is about touch and it’s about this human connection, but I’ve been having really meaningful interactions with patients just over the Internet, and I think part of that is patients are in their environment, their comfortable they are at home that they love the most. I’ve really come to hate the term social distancing because I’m continuing to have very meaningful human social interactions with people. And yes, I’m physically distancing, that’s for sure. But I’m certainly not socially distancing. I like to think of it as healthy distancing as opposed to social distancing. And something that you said really struck a chord with me, which is that you know, cancer patients often have gone through some of that mental journey of what’s life about and what’s meaningful and what matters. And I think that for others this may be a whole new kind of concept to grapple with, and I find that so often many of my cancer
patients really use this diagnosis as a teachable or a life changing moment. A chance to nurture relationships. They get even better. Prune some relationships that may not have been so healthy. Grab hold of experiences that they really want to savor. And that whole concept of gratitude and sucking the marrow out of life and knowing how vital it is to really experience all that life has to offer is something that cancer patients really often have come to. I think back about the moments that I really fell in love with the practice of Integrative Medicine. And I had done acupuncture when I was 13 and I had meditated a little older and I traveled around the world and saw different cultures that. But one of the moments that I really, really knew this was something that was important to me was when I was reading the integrative medicine textbook. And it said the benefits of ADHD are. And I was like wow.
The benefits of ADHD.

I mean, I’ve been taught my entire life, this is a pathology. This is a disease, it is a problem. This needs to be medicated and it shifted my perspective and I brought that up to one patient at one point and they broke down in front of me and they said, You know this isn’t how I would have wanted it, but I’ve strengthened my relationships. I’ve been reading more. I’ve been doing the things that I enjoy more. In some ways, I’m happier. And that is really what integrative medicine is about.

I think that especially with this pandemic so many of us are going through that same sort of process. On the one hand, who knew everybody loved making sourdough bread? On the one hand we’ve had this virus and I don’t want to diminish its effects at all. I mean, it certainly has caused so many people their lives.
It has really changed how we do so many things, but there’s so much now that we’re able to do that we didn’t think that we could before and there are so many things I’m now so grateful for. That I think I used to take for granted. This is what we were talking about before, right? The first thought is this is a horrible thing. And this is where mindfulness practice comes in. What do we do with that thought? Do we continue down that path? This is horrible. I feel horrible. I can’t stand this. Or do we say this is horrible, I’m going to go make my sourdough bread. I’m going to go take that course that I never took before online. This is horrible. I’m going to play my guitar for the first time in a very long time, even though we’re not diminishing what this means on a greater level, but there are so many opportunities here.
to better yourself and better your being and better your experience.

I never thought that what I was doing in terms of being grateful or seeing the positives in a pandemic was really a mindfulness practice. But when you put it that way, I guess it kind of is. I like to think so. I want to dig into some of the things that are really tragic about this pandemic, though because you know there are people who have been diagnosed with cancer. There are people who have been diagnosed with cancer during Covid. There are people who have lost their lives or their loved ones with one or both of those diagnosis. And sadly even in these times when you talk about human connection and not being able to be there to touch your patients, I can imagine what it feels like to be a family member who can’t go to a funeral because of regulations regarding the number of people who can attend. How do you get people through that?
You know, sometimes you don’t.
Sometimes you just let them be present.
You know we have such a tendency to try to make people feel better.
You know this will all be OK.
This will all go away.
This will all be better.
Sometimes it’s just a matter of letting them be in that moment and experience that moment because you know you can pardon my French, it sucks.
It’s tough.
And you want to be there and you can’t be there and how you’ve been conditioned to experience humanity has been completely turned on its head and we have to give people permission to experience that and to be there.
It really is difficult.
And I can imagine how you know, talking to somebody like yourself, somebody who specializes in integrative medicine, somebody who has been practicing mindfulness for a long time can really give people that space to kind of explore.
I want to get back into some of the other alternative therapies to that.
Our listeners might be thinking
And I really loved that concept of trying to explore people’s own cultures and what might resonate for them. But for people who are just kind of, you know, on the periphery of this, they may have heard about some of these things. Maybe some of their friends have told them, you really ought to try turmeric or vitamin C cleanses, or acupressure or whatever. Are there data that these practices can help? And is there a difference between using them as an alternative form of therapy? Or are they better positioned potentially to help with some of the side effects of standard therapy? Talk a little bit about how people who may be new to the whole space of complementary and alternative medicine might find out more? First and foremost, is an alternative option better. I don’t believe so, and I don’t think the research shows that. But what we provide is a space for you to ask those questions.
tons and tons of supplements, we work with the pharmacist to go over to see if they're safe and to see if they're beneficial. You know the state of research in Integrative Medicine certainly lacks, but that’s why the questions of is this a burden to the patient, or is this safe for the patient becomes so important because sometimes things that are safe for the patient may also be effective. I think in conventional medicine our biggest issue is that we see medical treatment as a group of 1000 or 10,000 and out of 10,000 people this worked for 8000. That’s a good number, right? That’s a really good number, but we’re ignoring the 2000 and then things that are safe for the patient may also be effective. We might look at this and say this only worked for 10 people out of 100. Well, if you’re one of those 10 people, this could be really life changing. This could be really helpful, and so in Integrative Medicine it’s important to give space for that while not hurting the conventional treatment,
which is probably the safest bet for you, which is probably the smartest decision for you, so with herbs and supplements, it takes more work diving in because there can be interactions but with other practices such as acupuncture, Massage Therapy, Reiki, these are practices that certainly data exists for some of them, but we also have to put it in the perspective of if it’s safe and if it makes that patient, that individual that one person feel better, then it works, then
it’s meaningful and it’s important to honor that patient and their individuality.
And the great news is that you can do both. You know it isn’t a one or the other. It frequently is both and so I think one of the critical things is to really, talk to your doctor, talk to your team and have that space to have that conversation so that you can take care of all of you. There are things that don’t get talked about in that 15 minutes that you’re with your doctor. And that’s things like sleep or
nutrition or exercise and coming to Integrative Medicine and being given that space is so important to the care of the patient. NOTE Confidence: 0.865415930747986

Dr. Gary Soffer is an assistant professor of clinical Pediatrics and director of the Integrative Medicine Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital, if you have questions, the address is canceranswers@yale.edu and past editions of the program are available in audio and written form at Yalecancercenter.org.

We hope you’ll join us next week to learn more about the fight against cancer here on Connecticut public radio.