

Helping Students Learn to Manage Anxiety

Eastern treatment modalities such as acupuncture and aromatherapy have been used since the third millennium BC. Mounting scientific evidence shows that these treatments are effective for medical problems ranging from addiction and anxiety to urinary tract infections and wrist pain.

MIND/BODY TECHNIQUES INTRODUCED IN SCHOOLS

MGH psychiatrist Nada Milosavljevic, MD, JD, is pioneering the use of mind/body techniques, sound therapy, aromatherapy and acupuncture in her treatment of high school students in Massachusetts to address anxiety and stress-related disorders. Through the Integrative Health Program (IHP), she teaches adolescents how to reduce the symptoms of anxiety and stress, and to take more responsibility for their bodies and their health. The program was introduced in Chelsea and Revere high schools last year, and this year in the Rindge and Latin High School in Cambridge.

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— Shuly Sejour, student, age 18

Anxiety and stress-related disorders are widespread and costly to society. Eighteen percent of U.S. adults and 25 percent of 13 to 18 year olds – one out of every four – are estimated to suffer from an anxiety disorder at any given time. According to the most recent figures available, anxiety disorders cost the U.S. more than \$42 billion a year, almost one-third of the country’s \$148 billion total mental health bill.

STUDENTS GAIN SENSE OF CONTROL

The students participating in the IHP program bear their share of anxiety and stress, but using the tools and techniques that Dr. Milosavljevic has taught them, they exude newfound confidence and health:

“I felt energized after meeting Nada,” said Wilnalis Mercado (16) with a broad and playful smile, *“I had to join track just to burn up the extra energy.”*

“I was very much more in control of my emotions [after the treatments with Dr. Milosavljevic],” said 18-year-old Joycclyn Perez.

“I have just started,” said Shuly Sejour, age 18, *“but my session with Nada has become the center of my week.”*

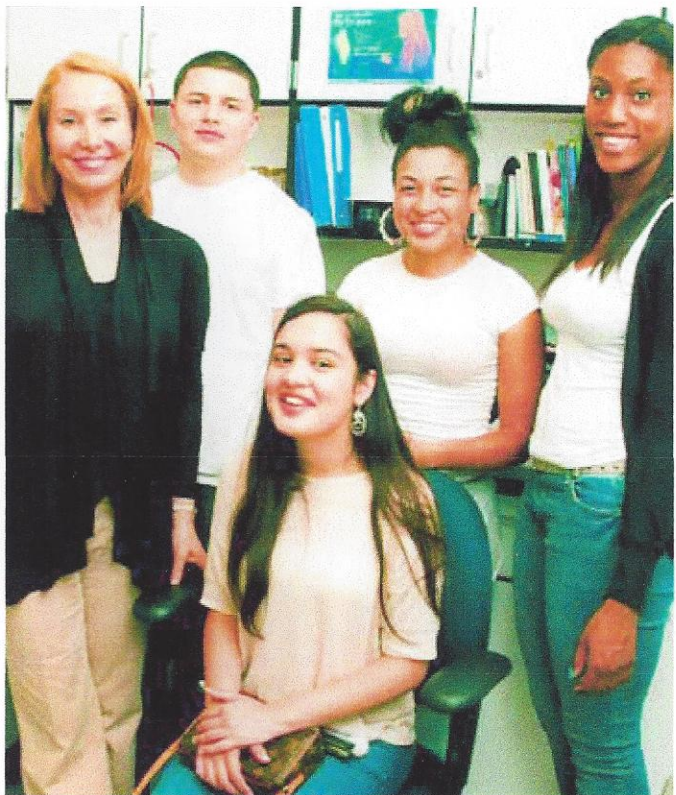
This is no mean feat in communities like Chelsea and Revere where other pressures can exacerbate emotional problems. Median household income in Chelsea, for example, is two thirds of the state average, with 27 percent of children living below the poverty line compared with the state average of 12.8 percent.

The program consists of eight, 30-minute weekly sessions that include acupuncture; sound therapy, which uses two large tuning forks; essential oils, which are the highly concentrated,

volatile extracts of flowers; and mind/body techniques, including breathing and mindfulness exercises. As take-aways, students also learn about pressure points and other techniques to manage mood and modulate their anxiety levels.

PROGRAM SHOWN TO DECREASE ANXIETY, INCREASE WELLNESS

Data on the program’s success are already robust: more than 50 students have participated and there has been a significant reduction in anxiety and stress-related symptoms among participants. Using the Beck Anxiety Inventory and an integrative medicine outcome measure known as the Web of Wellness – both of which are administered pre- and post-intervention – Dr. Milosavljevic has found that anxiety levels decreased on average by almost one third, and wellness increased by an average of 40 percent.



From left: Nada Milosavljevic, MD, with students Mario Mora, Darcy Smith, Shuly Sejour and Jade Lara (seated)

The Integrative Health Program was launched in 2011 with philanthropic support from an anonymous donor. Dr. Milosavljevic is optimistic that the program can expand throughout the state. In Massachusetts, there are 41 school-based health centers, providing plenty of opportunity for replication.

“This is a very doable, portable, potent and cost-effective treatment,” says Dr. Milosavljevic. “It can have a tremendous effect on the health and productivity of high school students.”