

HEALTH

There is still no cure for Aids but, as Denise Winn reports, people are learning, with the help of a variety of therapies, to live with the disease – to live, indeed, full and satisfying lives.

Illustration: Ian Hands

Two years ago Simon was ill with the rare form of pneumonia that all too often kills people with Aids. While he was in hospital, a friend offered him "healing", better known, incorrectly, as "faith healing". "I immediately felt as if I was pumped full of energy," he said. "I felt positive and powerful and I realised that healing isn't just something that is done to you, it is something you can take on and work with. So I started to meditate as well, and to visualise my body healing, instead of feeling helpless."

Today he is healthy again, has had no recurrences, and he puts all that down to the dramatic effect healing has had on the way he lives. "It is amazing how my values have changed. I got out of a manic city life which I wasn't enjoying, and now am much more contented and do a less hectic job. The quality of my life has been richer in these two years than in the previous 10. I still have healing once a week and I believe in conventional medicine as well. They can work together."

Many people with Aids are exploring both conventional and complementary or holistic (whole person) approaches to treatment. Holistic therapy offers the chance to contribute to treatment rather than just to receive it. It is a confusing new world, however, for the uninitiated, as holistic approaches range widely indeed, from healing, homeopathy and acupuncture through to nutritional and cognitive therapies and much else in the middle. None offers bodily cures, but all aim to mobilise inner strength and empower the mind and spirit.

But according to Frontliners, a self-help group for people with Aids and ARC (Aids related complex) based at the Terrence Higgins Trust, a major Aids charity, many people who might be helped are wary because they don't know which therapy to choose, so avoid any. Some are expensive and, although the Trust can sometimes offer financial assistance, many people are reluctant to accept "hand-outs".

Frontliners tries to keep national lists both of different therapists and of people who have recommended them, who are willing to describe their own experience to new enquirers. They also have an Indian therapist, Shirin Naidoo, who comes once a week to the offices and offers free neurolinguistic programming (NLP), hypnotherapy and aromatherapy. "NLP is about exploring the maps of

WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE



reality we each have and showing how we can expand them to have many more choices in life," she said. "It is a very powerful therapy. I feel the mental aspect of Aids is even more important than the physical. You can learn to process differently what is happening to you. I believe we can achieve anything if we really want to and my heart, body and soul are in the work I do."

She uses both hypnotherapy and aromatherapy as adjuncts. "Aromatherapy has long been used in India to alter states of consciousness. Certain oils are calming when you smell or burn them, others are uplifting. They are excellent for the immune system."

Doctors who were once suspicious of alternative approaches are increasingly welcoming them as an addition to conventional medical treatment. For evidence of the mental – and consequent physical – benefits is growing. Dr Kai Kermani is a full-time GP and trained psychotherapist who three years ago was asked by a hospital doctor caring for Aids patients in London if he could help reduce their stress. Since then he has run evening

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courses in Autogenic Training (AT), a powerful technique for inducing deep relaxation, which normalises many physiological processes. Of the first group of 14 Aids patients he worked with (he has now taught more than 120 people who are HIV positive or who have Aids), nine are still alive. The usual expected survival time after diagnosis is only one or two years. Of the five who died, four either withdrew from support or gave up self-care. One fought all the way but was very severely ill when he first came for help.

Dr Kermani is humble about his achievements, although they have led to enquiries from all over the world. "I am inspired by the courage of the people I

have worked with," he says. In seven two-and-a-half-hour weekly sessions he encourages trainees, through relaxation, to get in touch with their emotions, to off-load all deep negative feelings, and to come to feel and trust their personal strength and power to fight back. He gives his home phone number in case anyone needs emergency support, and charges £10 for his whole course only so that people won't be inhibited from using it. He also recommends nutritious but simple and enjoyable foods and any additional form of therapy that an individual might personally find helpful.

He believes that by strengthening the mind in every possible way, and helping a person to get out and truly *live* again, the body also is made stronger and can benefit the more from conventional medication. Part of that strengthening comes from offering basic human affection. "I give people a hug when they arrive, and at first they might burst into tears because no one else has wanted to go near them."

This month the London Lighthouse project opens its doors to its first patients, and it plans to offer an integrated range of services, from diagnosis through to terminal care, with running costs covered by the four Thames health regions. "There will be a medical officer in charge and 30 full-time nurses, but we will also be offering any complementary therapy, such as acupuncture and massage, that residents want," said spokesman Casper Thomson. "People will choose what *they* want, rather than have set treatment regimes imposed on them." Already workshops on holistic health are being offered by the project and run by Anthony Hillin, who formerly led information sharing groups on complementary therapies as a volunteer for the Terrence Higgins Trust.

"I don't feel there is any one 'right' way," he said. "It is a case of finding what best suits individuals. The biggest factor is opposing hopelessness. People with Aids are programmed to think they will die, so they lose hope. They die because of that hopelessness rather than because of Aids."

Simon, who had healing after nearly dying of Aids, goes even further. "If a cure was discovered tomorrow, I would say Aids was the best thing that has happened to me. It made me take a good look at my life and change it. When the quality of your life improves, you *want* to stay alive, because it has become so rich." ●

Dr Kai Kermani has produced information and diet sheets which are available from the Loughton Centre for Autogenic Training, 10 Connaught Hill, Loughton, Essex IG10 4DU. Please enclose cheque for £1.50. For Frontliners telephone 01-831 0330.