

Kaiser's sanctuary gives care for workers

Growing number of staff members join class aiming to reduce stress

By Sandy Kleffman
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Kaiser Permanente's attention-grabbing ad campaign promises to help its members "thrive." But one group may be overlooked in that focus — the doctors, nurses and other employees so busy caring for patients that they neglect their own health needs.

A year ago, Dr. Neha Sangwan sought to change that by launching an unusual program at Kaiser in Walnut Creek that reminds caregivers to take time for themselves. Sangwan transformed a gurney storage room into a minisanctuary with art work, dimmed lights, a tabletop fountain and soothing music. Employees gather there for meditation, shaking out tensions, visualization, freeform dancing, juggling and other activities. After the activities, participants sit in a small circle, pass a rose quartz stone from one to the other and describe how they are feeling when the stone reaches them.

The goal is to help eliminate stress, reduce negativity and reconnect with themselves. "In the past, it's almost been a badge of honor to push through it, to keep going, to ignore my own body," Sangwan said. "This is about a culture change. "Participation is voluntary. About 100 people have gone through the eight-session program. For some, getting used to the techniques means overcoming inhibitions.

"I was very much frightened by it," admitted Alan Chan, a 36-year-old executive consultant for the Kaiser Permanente Medical Group. "Given that I'm a man and I'm Chinese, this doesn't go with my culture," he said. "But a friend recommended it. "After four sessions, Chan calls the classes "phenomenal." "I think it will help us communicate and take care of each other better," he said. "I've learned a lot about myself."

One recent afternoon, Chan joined seven others in a class led by Sangwan. When Sangwan announced they were about to juggle, one woman commented, "Oh God, I'm so horrible at this." "Notice the self-talk that's in your head," Sangwan replied. The juggling helps people become aware of their negativity when trying something new, which can prevent them from realizing their potential on the job, Sangwan said. Soon participants were on their feet throwing balls in the air, dropping many of them, and laughing to the lively beat of "Where is the Love?" by the Black Eyed Peas. Sangwan ended the class with meditation. Participants sat quietly, eyes closed, as

she directed them to relax parts of their body. "If there's an area of your body that you're noticing is tight, I'd like you to breathe into that space," she said. "As you breathe in, breathe in peace and light. As you breathe out, breathe out anything that no longer serves you."

Their homework for the following week: Spend 10 minutes fully aware of their surroundings as they drive home from work, instead of mindlessly commuting. Maria Thurston, a registered nurse in Kaiser's oncology unit, said the classes have taught her techniques that enable her to take a few minutes during the day to ease the stress of her job. "You have to refocus," she said.

Sangwan cut back on her physician duties at the hospital to launch the program. She uses techniques learned at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., and the Innovative Learning Group in Eugene, Ore. Some employees receive permission from their managers to participate in the two-hour classes while on the job. Others do it during their time off.

With interest growing, Sangwan is training others to lead the sessions. Kaiser will conduct surveys before and after the classes to measure the effect on job satisfaction and the ability to manage stress. For Sangwan, one of the benefits of the program is that doctors, nurses and others participate side by side, building a greater sense of camaraderie. "Now everyone's starting to believe that in these four walls," she said, "they can find a sense of peace and calm." Reach Sandy Kleffman at 925-943-8249 or skleffman@cctimes.com.