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## Doctor urges curing PTSD in both mind and body

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By Bruce Murkoff

LAKEVILLE — On a damp chilly evening at the end of May, a large and enthusiastic group consisting mostly of health professionals and therapists from Connecticut and New York gathered in a heated tent at the Interlaken Inn in Lakeville for dinner and a lecture by renowned psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk.

The talk was sponsored by the Foundation for Community Health, a nonprofit organization based in Sharon. The group, under the current leadership of Nancy Heaton and Gertrude O'Sullivan, is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of our local communities through advocacy, research and presenting distinguished speakers such as Dr. van der Kolk.

Van der Kolk has been the medical director of the Trauma Center in Boston for the past 30 years, and is a professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine. He is also the author of the bestselling book "The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and the Body in the Healing of Trauma."

His approach to treating trauma patients is both exciting and revolutionary. He encourages other doctors to expand their thinking and join him in exploring and utilizing inventive ways to relieve the stress of trauma sufferers. As Lakeville resident Dr. John Charde said before the talk, van der Kolk is "a real provocateur."

Van der Kolk believes that trauma is everywhere. Harvard educated, he first came to prominence in the late 1970s when he went to work in a VA clinic in Boston. Treating Vietnam vets gave him his first insights into how trauma affects the mind and body. He realized that in therapy sessions, all these men talked about were the atrocities they witnessed or were complicit in, and how this kept sucking them back into their traumas instead of releasing them. They could not escape their pasts and therefore learned to expect nothing but the worst.

He further understood that victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had a difficult time living in "the here and now," and an alternative and more productive way of helping them recover would be to redirect their thoughts and their talk to the present and the future. By practicing this method, often the traumatized are able to overcome their introversion and get back in sync with others. In recovery they may find what Pavlov called an "instinct of purpose," the instinct that gives life meaning.

Van der Kolk has used this same method when dealing with victims of child abuse and neglect. Childhood traumas often lead to depression, drug abuse or suicide. More than 3 million children are

reportedly abused every year — and van der Kolk believes that this is an underestimation. Abuse leads to self-hatred. People turn to drugs or alcohol or overeating to deal with the pain.

“You make bad choices because you can’t stand how you feel,” van der Kolk said.

What makes van der Kolk’s approach unique is his willingness to try varied and unorthodox methods to help patients process their traumas and turn them into memories rather than experiences they are constantly reliving.

A turning point for him came when he watched a video of a traumatized woman reliving a car accident that almost killed her. It was not just the reliving of the experience that captivated him; it was watching how the woman held her body. She was both slouched and tense and van der Kolk realized that the body, as well as the mind, determines how we feel. To relieve the trauma and stress, both issues must be addressed.

While acknowledging that it “sounds crazy,” he believes that Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) can help some victims deal with the manifestations of their traumas.

He is also a proponent of yoga in treating victims of PTSD, and believes in the benefits of tai chi and other movement-oriented programs.

He also pointed out the benefits of meditation, where a patient gets to know him- or herself by paying attention to him- or herself.

He continually reminded the audience that the mind and body are connected, and you can’t effectively treat one without treating the other.

Van der Kolk’s talk was good humored, freewheeling and expansive, encouraging his audience of health professionals to explore new and varied methods to better aid victims of trauma, and help them reconnect with themselves and those around them.

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