



THE CENTER FOR MIND-BODY MEDICINE WORKS WITH NEW YORK FIREFIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO DEAL WITH STRESS AFTER 9/11

Feb 2, 2003 2:41 pm US/Eastern

Told to shut his eyes and shake his body vigorously with his limbs gyrating like rubber bands, Kevin Guy began to reconsider whether he should have signed up for this.

"Is this guy for real?" wondered the hulking Bronx-born firefighter as he began Dr. Jim Gordon's program of meditation, yoga and alternative healing therapies to help firefighters deal with the emotional stress of the Sept. 11 attacks.

That one-time workshop was last summer, not long after the end of the nine-month cleanup of human remains and World Trade Center debris. Now, Guy meditates and "shakes" stress away nearly every day.

"It really calms you down," said Guy -- who is helping Gordon launch a regular program for city firefighters beginning Monday.

Gordon, picked by then-President Clinton to head a two-year White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy, has used similar workshops to help survivors of war in Kosovo and Bosnia. The Manhattan native and founder of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington decided last year to adapt the program for firefighters.

But how do you get a firefighter to stretch out on a mat in a yoga pose, meditate to soft music or learn to breathe steadily -- practices initially deemed "ridiculous and crazy" by most first-timers, Gordon said.

"What we do is we say 'Look, you're practical people, try it for yourself and see if it makes a difference,'" Gordon said. "The bottom line for them is, 'OK Doc, I never heard of this stuff before, but if it can help, let's check it out.'"

The sessions begin a week after Mount Sinai Medical Center released preliminary findings from a federal program that screened workers who responded to the terrorist attack and aided in its cleanup. Ten months after Sept. 11, 52 percent reported mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, doctors said.

The findings were based on a random sample of 250 people from the first 500 workers examined; 3,500 people have been screened in six months.

Gordon, who also is a clinical professor of psychiatry and family medicine at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, founded the Center for Mind-Body Medicine to focus on the ways in which emotional, mental, social and spiritual factors can affect health.

Basic techniques include relaxation, meditation, yoga, visual imagery, self-hypnosis and group support. The center also works with cancer patients and people suffering from other chronic illnesses.

On Monday in Soho, they will hold the first of a regular series of workshops for firefighters and their spouses -- many of whom have struggled with their own post-traumatic stress since the terrorist attacks.

Susan O'Brien, whose husband's Manhattan firehouse lost seven men, attended last summer's upstate retreat and wants to stay with the program that she says has given her a new perspective on a life that had seemed pretty grim.

"That glimmer of hope starts to shine through a little bit better, rather than dwelling in the past," O'Brien said. "It's a little different than anything I'm used to but it keeps me calm, teaches me how to stay focused and teaches new ways of looking to the future."

Her husband, who was not on duty when the trade center was attacked, hasn't warmed up to alternative healing in group sessions, although he does try techniques at home with her.

About 40 people are expected to attend the Monday class. Guy wants to recruit more by convincing his brethren that Gordon's program is a take-charge, independent type of therapy that should appeal to tough-minded firefighters.

"You're not on a psychiatrist's couch -- it's just basic things that you can do to help yourself."