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Kenya Polio Survivors Embrace Yoga

Alicia Helion, PhD, Eshiakula, Kenya

"Habari Asabuhi, Karibu!"

The students receive my Swahili greeting before we begin practicing yoga in one of the most unlikely places: rural western Kenya. These yoga students are primarily polio survivors, and they are attending classes at the Amani (peace in Swahili) Educational Center. At this center, people with disabilities and HIV practice yoga, hear guest speakers on health-related topics and have fellowship.

Here, in a tiny village called Eshiakula, yoga classes are often the only "medical care" people with disabilities can access. There are free clinics, but the few dollars it costs to get to the town is more than most can afford. So many participants have untreated medical conditions, often living with severe pain. Further, many deal daily with the stress of discrimination, poverty and living with a

disability. Yoga offers them a reduction in pain, increased flexibility and strength and a respite from stress.

Though the center opened in 2013, the seeds were planted in 2008, when I took my first service trip to Africa to work in Mozambique. I was touched by the wonderful spirit of the people. They had such perseverance, great joy and immense generosity. Every summer, I went back to work in Africa.

In 2011, I made my first visit to Kenya where I taught HIV prevention to people with disabilities and classes on stress reduction, nutrition and medication adherence. The participants told me that stress reduction was particularly important for them as they have intense stress daily and need better ways to manage; they asked me to come back the next year with even more knowledge on how they could reduce stress. I returned, armed with many more techniques to offer them, including yoga. I was amazed by the benefits people experienced after practicing yoga just a few times. They asked me to learn more about yoga and come back again!

In 2013, when I decided to leave my job as a professor to work in the health field, it felt like an obvious choice to open a health education center in Kenya, with a focus on stress reduction. I wanted to include yoga, and I planned to tailor classes to those with disabilities, allowing everyone to reap the benefits. After taking a yoga teacher training program, a workshop on



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- ▷ Some people have estimated that it take take polio survivors up to 12 times longer to recover from the effects of bed rest.
See www.post-polio.org/edu/pphnews/pph12-2.html#liv

In summary, your recovery time from a viral illness will depend on how severe the infection is relative to limiting your activity, how long the limitations persist, and the severity and extent of polio involvement of your muscles.

Question: Have any studies been done to determine if polio affects sexual functioning?

Answer: I am unaware of any medical studies of sexual function in polio survivors. Conventional medical opinion is that polio did not affect sexual functioning of survivors, and the history of normal potency in men who have had polio and fertility among women polio survivors would support this opinion as accurate. Let me know if you have any specific concerns about this broad topic.

Question: I am a 61-year-old female who has recently been diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. I am looking for the latest research on improving muscle function in the affected limb. Are there new medicines that can improve muscle functioning?

Answer: Research studies have demonstrated that muscle strength and endurance can be improved among polio survivors, even those diagnosed with PPS, through individually designed exercise programs that are monitored and advanced slowly over three to six months. The major challenge is to find a personally optimal intensity of resistance and of duration to achieve desired results (a goal) without any negative consequences (side effects such as pain or activity-limiting fatigue).

There are no medicines that research has clearly shown to be effective for specifically improving muscle functioning of post-polio survivors. Clinical experience suggests that medicines to control pain that interfere with activity or exercise may help restore or improve lost muscle function. Taking medicines to control or cure other general health problems can also be important for permitting improvements in muscle function by promoting participation in exercise and/or activity. However, all medicines must be monitored for possible negative side effects.

It is also important to remember that a healthy diet with sufficient protein, optimal fat and calories and generous vitamins and minerals is critical for optimal muscle functioning. Limiting high stress, having optimal sleep and achieving good emotional health are also all important for obtaining and maintaining limb muscle function through optimal activity and exercise. ■

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adapting yoga for people with disabilities, and fundraising for four months, I was ready to go to Kenya! I returned to Eshiakula in late 2013, having secured a building and enough funds to get started.

Located about seven miles from the town of Mumias, which is known for its sugar-cane processing plant, Eshiakula is several miles from any paved road, with only a few shops which residents refer to as “the shopping center.” This remote location is one of the reasons it was an ideal place for a health education center –

there are no NGOs providing any services here, no health center, and apart from a school (which few can afford), there are not many educational opportunities.

Many of the 50 members at the Amani Center have survived polio. In a massive country-wide effort, polio vaccinations were given last fall, but in even the recent past, polio vaccines have been inaccessible due to finances and/or lack of knowledge. And once a person has contracted polio, they often lack the

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funds to get proper medical care. Most of the post-polio participants at the center are farmers, raising a few crops and maintaining a few animals on small plots of land; the money they make is not enough to provide daily food much less to seek out specialized medical care.

People in Eshiakula are turning to the Amani Educational Center to improve their health and well-being without having to pay large fees or travel great



distances. The center offers health education workshops, yoga classes and general education such as an English course, computer literacy classes and guest speakers on subjects like agriculture and entrepreneurship.

The center is run by its own group members, with an elected chairperson and other officers attending to the daily operation of the center. Several members are currently training one-on-one with me in an internship program at the center; these women will offer yoga classes and other workshops at the center once I return to the United States.

Alicia Helion grew up on a farm in North Dakota. She earned a bachelor's degree in Psychology from North Dakota State University, master's degree from Brown University and a PhD from the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee where she specialized in Health/Social Psychology. Her focus is on how to effectively provide health information across cultures. She was an Associate Professor of Psychology at Lakeland College, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, until 2013, when she chose to open the Amani Educational Center.

Since participants cannot hope to run the center through their own meager finances, they are seeking ways to secure additional funds through grants, donations and income-generating activities. Members are currently planning to make and sell soap and are considering opening a greenhouse. They hope the funds raised will be enough to support the center, with maybe even a bit left over to support themselves. Their first plan is to create a larger space for the Amani Center; the one-room school/studio/office is full to capacity for many of our health seminars and we have had to turn people away from our yoga classes due to lack of space.

It will cost \$4,000 to buy a large plot of land near the Eshiakula shopping center and build a suitable building. Amani Center members have already planned to keep costs low and community involvement high by building the structure themselves, even making the bricks by hand. Their excitement about the center is contagious!

It isn't surprising that the community members are passionate about keeping the Amani Educational Center going strong: the members are feeling the benefits, especially from practicing yoga. Some polio survivors report improved flexibility, more strength or just "feeling better" overall.

Rukia, a 29-year-old woman who has use of only one leg, says she can travel further distances because of practicing yoga. Nicodemous, in his 40s and having lost one leg to polio, is able to dig in his fields with less pain. He says, "I used to dig a small portion before yoga. But now, I can dig even a big portion without feeling chest pain ... because of yoga." He looks earnestly at me and says, "Let yoga continue!" ■

To learn more about the Amani Centre, check out the Facebook page at www.facebook.com/AmaniEducationalCenter or send an email to AmaniCenterKenya@gmail.com.