

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

## **Rape crisis center goes beyond traditional support**

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By NICOLE ZIMMERMAN / Towns Correspondent

Recovering from trauma of any type is never easy, but for people who have survived sexual violence, the path to healing can be especially arduous.

To help them develop mind/body coping skills that go beyond traditional support, a Santa Rosa rape crisis center is experimenting with classes that include Pilates, mindful breathing, massage, dance and yoga.

Chris Castillo, the executive director of Verity, a Sonoma County sexual assault and trauma center, was thinking about the lasting physical effects of that stress when she came up with a plan to offer free Alternative Healing classes to the community.

For 37 years the organization has provided a 24-hour crisis line, counseling, advocacy, referral and prevention services. But they wanted to develop more ways to support their clients.

“Trauma gets stuck in a place in your body, and you don’t even realize it,” says Castillo. “We thought it would be great to combine mind and body healing.”

With \$4,050 in grant money from the 2011 Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, she was able to launch summer sessions for women, men and teens over 12. Verity is seeking the money to continue classes past August.

By focusing on the mind-body connection in a safe, confidential environment, each session is designed to promote self-care and a more positive outlook on life. The goal is for participants to learn ways to heal themselves in times of stress, or “when a traumatic incident re-emerges, to not allow it to capture them and take over their lives,” says Castillo.

“People who have suffered sexual trauma tend to leave their bodies. That’s how they survive what they’ve gone through,” says Jae Newman, a 60-year-old Pilates instructor who has been teaching for 12 years. “Doing slow, conscious exercise brings people back.”

Like dance and yoga, Pilates helps with balance, core strength, flexibility and posture. But the main intent of these classes is to release tension and stress through stretching, movement and breath. Using a gentle approach, she allows room for a range of emotional expression, including tears.

She is especially sensitive to younger and older women with poor body image or who feel unaccustomed to exercising, Newman believes that when students are given space to remain in control then they don’t have to measure up to someone else’s standard.

“Pilates is a gentle reintroduction for people to feel good about their bodies and to regain trust and pride. That sense of strength then translates into being able to say no, or going out and getting a job, whatever is up for them in their lives.”

“The body naturally wants to be healed and to heal. Moving the body creates the space for that to happen,” says Maggie Minervini-Zick, who teaches Verity’s dance classes.

Since 2009, the 32-year-old has facilitated a free-form style she calls “a moving meditation practice.” It allows people to interpret the dance that works for them, whether that means curling up into a ball on the floor or leaping across the room.

While she is also an MFT intern, Minervini-Zick makes it clear that counseling is not her role at Verity. But her background does inform her therapeutic approach, including living at Esalen Institute for more than a year.

“I work from the understanding that experience and memory are stored in the body on a cellular level. Whatever modality is used — dance, Pilates, breath work, or personal massage techniques — creates space within the body container to heal on its own,” she says.

Her classes always begin with the breath and then connect breath to movement.

First she teaches simple exercises such as brushing or tapping the body, or coordinating the left and right sides, warming and waking up the whole body. Anyone can do these movements for a couple of minutes during the day to stay calm, whether emotionally overwhelmed or stuck in traffic.

Finally, she offers creative imagery or guided movement so participants don’t feel inhibited having to think up ideas all on their own.

“This isn’t a dance form that’s about doing the right moves or looking really great. It’s about experiencing yourself just as you are,” she says. “There’s freedom and healing in that.”

Just two women showed up for a recent class, but Castillo expects more will come. She acknowledges that it can take time before people are willing to jump into something new and unfamiliar, particularly Verity clients.

To insure participants’ safety and comfort, each instructor is fingerprinted and given a background check. She also interviews them “to make sure they understand our mission and the level of respect we give every single person who walks through our door.”

If grant money can be obtained, Castillo would like to see the program expand to shelters and other locations where clients already reside or can easily reach on foot or by bus.

Currently, classes are held Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Verity conference room, and Wednesdays at the Catholic Charities Family Support Center, which also hosts a Spanish drop-in support group for survivors of sexual assault and their family and friends. Wednesday classes are bilingual.

Dates, times and locations are subject to change, but can be confirmed at [ourverity.org/events/calendar](http://ourverity.org/events/calendar) or 545-7270.

Verity is located at 835 Piner Road, Suite D. Call 545-7270 for information and referrals. The 24/7 crisis line is 545-7273.

Catholic Charities Family Support Center is located at 465 A St.