



Craniosacral  
specialist  
Dr. Ingrid Bacci with  
patient Mario  
DeMaria.

# THE HOLISTIC TRUTH

Alternative medicine is exploding in Westchester. But be forewarned: Side effects might include health, happiness, and a brand-new outlook on life.

BY JEANNE MUCHNICK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH OROZCO

**F**orty-four-year-old Beth Rubin Proper had just about given up hope of ever conceiving again, when a friend mentioned acupuncturist Dody Chang. “I had pretty much seen every kind of specialist at that point,” she says. And though the Irvington resident swears she’s not “the granola type,” she kept an open mind. Four weeks later she was pregnant. And she says she enjoyed her most stress-free pregnancy, thanks to continual visits with Chang. Incidentally, Proper gave birth to a healthy baby girl 18 months ago.

For Peekskill’s Diane Brewer-Collier, the key to losing 35 pounds (and counting) was meeting with Sara Oppenheim, the hypnotherapist on staff at Hudson Valley Hospital Center’s Wellness Club in Cortlandt Manor, who, in just two sessions, was able to convince her that vegetables could satisfy her snacking. “I wasn’t drinking enough water and couldn’t stop eating fat and salty snacks,” she says. “But Sara gave me the message on a subconscious level to change my eating habits. She also made me more aware of when I was full.”

Maria DeMaria of White Plains, on the other hand, swears by Cortlandt Manor-based cranial specialist Ingrid Bacci, Ph.D., the only one able to solve



Mount Kisco-based Evan Zhao specializes in herbal treatments and acupuncture.

her infant son's colic. "It turns out his neck position was affecting his gassiness," she says. "His head had been slightly twisted to the left when he was born, and Ingrid was able to solve the problem with simple touches that manipulated his muscles. It was great, because we didn't have to do anything dramatic. Plus, it only took a few weeks of treatment to see results."

Welcome to the world of holistic therapy, also known as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) or integrative medicine. Here, folks with backaches, migraines, infertility, and weight issues (among others), are seeking solutions beyond mainstream medicine—and getting positive results. Often, these treatments are substitutes to pharmaceutical medicines and invasive surgeries, and, more often than not, patients have sought out traditional methods first—sometimes years' worth, as was the case with Brewer-Collier, who tried diet after diet before finally turning to hypnotherapy.

Instead of simply rectifying a few pesky symptoms, alternative-medicine centers on treating the "whole person"—emotional, physical, and spiritual. The trend has become so mainstream, in fact, that the National Institutes of Health recognizes it as a viable entity. In our area alone, the field is exploding. Greenwich Hospital has its own holistic facility at its Cos Cob location, and The Wellness Club at Hudson Valley Hospital Center in Cortlandt Manor stresses "using the power of your mind to get to the heart of your body's fitness potential." Full Circle Family Care in White Plains bills itself as "the

## GETTING STARTED

Before selecting a CAM therapy or practitioner, talk with your primary health-care provider(s) for suggestions. Make sure to go prepared with a list of questions about their credentials and practice. Where did they receive their training? What licenses or certifications do they have? How much will the treatment cost? Go to the first visit prepared to answer questions about your health history, including injuries, surgeries, and major illnesses, as well as prescription medicines, vitamins, and other supplements you may take. Ask, too, about insurance. Some CAM therapies are covered; though, even with insurance, you may be responsible for a percentage of the cost.

center for lifelong health and healing," and we haven't even mentioned the host of other holistic specialists in private practice all over the county.

Indeed, CAM includes a wide range of therapies, which varies from widely accepted techniques like yoga and massage to less-mainstream treatments such as Reiki (healing by touch), acupuncture (stimulation by needles), and craniosacral therapy (upper back, neck, and head massage). And though each treatment has its skeptics, anyone can enjoy the perks. Says Jack Pessin, a Rye-based traveling practitioner who specializes in massage and acupuncture: "I have patients from every sector—from artists to lawyers to housewives."



To what do we owe this groundswell of interest? First off, today's patients are more in tune with their health. Second, many consumers (and even physicians) are no longer happy with the health-care system. Doctors are fed up with HMOs, and patients are hard-pressed to find a doctor to spend more than two rushed minutes with them (let's not even get into those paper-thin gowns and cold examining rooms). Fortunately, places like Full Circle Family Care fill the void. "We're not a place you go just because you're sick," explains Lisa Gussack, Full Circle's founder and chief executive officer. "Instead, we're a place where people want to learn *how to stay healthy*. It's more about prevention, stress reduction, limiting toxic environment, and learning about good nutrition."

Intrigued? So were we—which is why we signed on for holistic remedies all over the county. Here, you'll see what three alternative-medicine treatments entail. Could one of them be right for you?



Dr. Ingrid Bacci sees patients (young and old!) in her Cortlandt Manor home.

## CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

Not many people really "get" craniosacral therapy, explains Ingrid Bacci, Ph.D., who tells me it's a scientifically based form of manual therapy that uses very light touch—about the weight of a nickel—to treat mental stress, neck and back pain, TMJ syndrome, and other chronic pain. It's based on the principle that light stimulation acts as a "trigger" to wake up the body's self-healing ability. A lot of it comes down to mind over matter, explains the Cortlandt Manor-based health practitioner who was able to "self-heal" her own chronic pain. "For example," she says, "You break a leg and you heal, but now you tend to favor that leg, developing restrictions in other parts of your body. Ultimately, you develop hip pain or back pain, as a consequence. In a case like this, the body is in a state of 'organized dysfunction.' A craniosacral therapist 'undoes' the poor organization of the body, giving it a chance to 'reorganize' itself more functionally."

Yet, because the work is so subtle—and few people really understand it—it tends to have more naysayers than other therapies. Maria DeMaria of White Plains,

however, isn't one of them. She says it's helped her—and her infant son—tremendously.

She heard about Dr. Bacci through a friend (incidentally, the way most people find their holistic practitioners). Her son, Mario, then two months old, was very colicky and gassy. This being her second child, DeMaria knew something was "off." Changing formulas hadn't helped, and the family was hesitant to do anything radical. Which is what led them to Dr. Bacci's Cortlandt Manor home office. Dr. Bacci put Mario in her lap and moved her hands around his head and neck. "That's when she told us, his neck position was affecting his gassiness and making him uncomfortable," says DeMaria. "It all made sense because of the issues he had when he was born."

Based on her recommendation, I make my own trek to Dr. Bacci's residence, in a gorgeous, stone apartment complex, off a rural road—where I actually spy deer and rabbits (already de-stressing signs!). A few minutes into our conversation, she tells me I'm torqued, meaning my posture is off balance—my left side is weighing me down. When I think about it, I

## HOLISTIC FOR DUMMIES

### ACUPUNCTURE

**WHAT IS IT?** A traditional Chinese energy-therapy, where fine needles are inserted into the skin to stimulate specific points of the body and balance *chi* (your body's life force). It's used to treat everything from arthritis to infertility. **DOES IT HURT?** No! Most people report feeling little to no pain. To me, it felt like tiny pricks.

### CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

**WHAT IS IT?** A hands-on form of healing that delicately manipulates the bones of the head and lower spine to improve the central nervous system, strengthen immunity, and enhance overall health. **DOES IT HURT?** Not usually, though you might feel some light-headedness as your tissues release pain.

### HYPNOSIS

**WHAT IS IT?** A process that includes a deep state of relaxation in which patients are better able to work through issues affecting their lives. It can help improve health, confidence, relationships, and performance in sports and even help you overcome bad habits, addictions, fears, and phobias. **DOES IT HURT?** No, though some people may feel heavy or lethargic, while others report feeling light and weightless.

### REIKI

**WHAT IS IT?** A traditional Asian energy-therapy, based on rebalancing the life force known as *qi*. The therapist's hands are placed at 12 to 15 specified points for a few minutes to read and rechannel the patient's *qi*. **DOES IT HURT?** No. It's basically just light touching. On me, it tickled a bit.



Irvington-based acupuncturist Dody Chang specializes in women's issues.

realize I often do feel lopsided—but I always thought that was from constantly carrying my heavy pocketbook on my right side. She goes on to say that the severe TMJ I've had for years is also contributing to this unevenness, "But let's see."

She leads me to a massage bed, set up in a formal living space, which feels like an English sitting room. I'm fully clothed as she slowly manipulates her fingers underneath me in an attempt to realign my spine. It's calming, and I close my eyes while she applies pressure mostly to my back, upper neck, and head. I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, but I feel a gentle shifting of my body as my right shoulder starts to lean deeper into the bed, and I feel a sense of relaxation and a slight loosening in my shoulders. The whole procedure takes about an hour; I'm actually disappointed when she's done.

She tells me I might feel dizzy, over the next few days (which I did). To be fully aligned, she prescribes three sessions, but, since they start at \$175 each, I wait on scheduling the next. Still, I leave her home feeling lighter, and more conscious of my posture than ever before.

### ACUPUNCTURE

Battling a hip ailment for nearly two years, Mamaroneck's Jean Marie Steinhas has seen her share of specialists: a podiatrist, who gave her orthotics, and two chiropractors, who took x-rays, tried various remedies, and ultimately failed to change a thing. The tedious process led her to Dr. Jun Wu, the Mamaroneck-based acupuncturist she had seen years earlier for tennis elbow. Dr Wu, alleviated most of her pain.

Steinhas isn't the only convert. Louis Bastone of Irvington admits he had reservations about alternative therapies. But when traditional treatment failed to end the debilitating pain he suffered after hip-replacement surgery, he called upon acupuncturist Dody Chang. Her calm demeanor and intelligence impressed him immediately. "Her knowledge of the human body is comparable to any trained physician," he says. "She just approaches the problem in a different way." Chang targeted the hip muscles, nerves, and lower lumbar regions of his body and was, over time, able to help him feel less pain. He says, "Now that I've tried it, I've learned how invaluable her help can be. I would recommend acupuncture to anyone."

Chang's office, in an old Irvington factory building—also home to the restaurant One and Eileen Fisher's corporate offices—is a comfortable



"Reiki" refers to "universal life energy." Here, Valerie Schott during a session.

space, with exposed red brick and high ceilings. Our first meeting lasts 90 minutes (the initial visit is \$120; follow-ups are \$90), and, though I'm here to cure chronic back pain, it includes a thorough medical history—how many hours of sleep I get, what I eat for breakfast, my general level of stress.

"You don't eat very much, do you?" she asks, after I stick out my tongue and say, "Aahh." She doesn't hide behind a desk when she talks to me. In fact my treatment room doesn't have a desk at all: just a white chair, a white sofa, and a massage bed. We sit in here together, me on the sofa; she in the chair, much like two women chatting in a family room. Except here, the focus is totally on me.

When I first lie down on her table, she works my bare back with her hands—kind of like a deep massage, except she's kneading and probing my key pain points, readying my skin for the needles, which admittedly, makes me nervous. But then: a pinch. That's it. Plucking my eyebrows hurts more.

After a while, I get used to the small squeezes and I'm lulled into a deep state of relaxation. When it's over, I feel a huge weight lifted from my shoulders—a calm I haven't felt in a long, long time.

### REIKI

Painful shin splints led Gina Gualtiere to try Reiki, an ancient treatment that involves using touch to channel healing-energy. Gualtiere was in pain, at a softball game, when a woman in the stands asked if she could help. "I was skeptical but desperate, and so I said, 'Sure,'" she recalls. "By the end of 15 minutes of her touching my legs and ankles, I was able to get back on the field." Despite what she calls a "skeptical pre-med background," she was hooked.

As it turns out, the woman sitting in the stands was Valerie Gaglione Schott, a Larchmont Reiki specialist, whom I visit myself. Val and I begin the hour-long session in her family room-style office, which is more 1970s mod than calming Zen. There's a lava lamp in one corner, a massage bed in another, a poster listing the *chakras* of the body, and a dark, L-shaped couch, where we sit and talk (\$75 per 50-minute session). First, Val wants to know about my life stresses—my deadline-crazed job, my "moody" teenage girls, and my own insecurities about not doing enough for everyone, when, in reality, I'm stretched from all of my carpooling, dinner-making, and laundry demands.

When it's time for the treatment, I lie, face-up, fully clothed, on the massage bed, while she puts a few fingers under my body and works her way up and down my key *chakra* points, basically four points on the head. Then she goes to the throat, heart, solar plexus, and navel (and, yes, it tickles!). Basically, she just touches me very lightly, and after I get over the usual uneasiness of feeling a stranger's touch, I get used to it. It's calming, though I'm not really sure what it's doing for me, except maybe giving me permission to nap.

Afterwards she tells me I had a blockage near my neck, which she got rid of, and, just like acupuncturist Dody Chang, she comments on the fact that my back seemed a bit "off." Could this be why I feel so dizzy when I get up? I actually need a minute to regroup before leaving her office.

In the end, I'm not sure what Reiki did for me. I certainly didn't feel any different, though a day later, at my second acupuncture appointment, Chang notices that my back seems more aligned than before. And those 50 minutes did feel like a nice investment, easing the tension of my typical, stress-filled, fast-paced day. **ITW**

## WHERE TO FIND RELIEF

**DR. INGRID BACCI**  
SPECIALTY Craniosacral therapy  
COST \$175 per hour, though can vary, depending on treatment  
DETAILS 341 Furnace Dock Rd., Unit 1; Cortlandt Manor; 293-0898; ingridbacci.com

**DODY CHANG**  
SPECIALTY Acupuncture; herbal remedies; fertility issues and concerns  
COST \$120 for first session; \$90 for each additional  
DETAILS One Bridge St., Ste. 22; Irvington; 882-4151

**FULL CIRCLE FAMILY CARE**  
SPECIALTY Women's health; midwifery; acupuncture; chiropractic, and more  
COST Varies with treatment  
DETAILS 1241 Mamaroneck Ave.; White Plains; 421-1500; fullcirclefamilycare.com

**VALERIE GAGLIONE SCHOTT**  
SPECIALTY Reiki; personal-development coaching  
COST Reiki is \$75 for one 50-minute session, or \$300 for five  
DETAILS Soma Space; 178 Myrtle Blvd., Ste. 105; Larchmont; 833-3388; somaspace.org

**JACK PESSIN**  
SPECIALTY Oriental medicine—acupuncture; massage, herbs  
COST \$175 for 90-minute session (60-minute massage, 30-minute acupuncture)  
DETAILS 393-3560; gatewayacupuncture.com

**HUDSON VALLEY HOSPITAL WELLNESS CLUB**  
SPECIALTY Nutritional counseling; hypnosis; massage  
COST Varies by treatment  
DETAILS 3163 E. Main St.; Mohegan Lake; 526-2366; hvhc.org

**JENNIFER BATTAGLINO**  
SPECIALTY Hypnotherapy  
COST Varies, but expect to pay \$225 per 90-minute session; \$150 per 60-minute session  
DETAILS 178 Myrtle Blvd., Ste. 107; Larchmont; 315-1823; theharwoodcenter.com

**EVAN ZHAO**  
SPECIALTY Oriental medicine—acupuncture; massage; Chinese herbs; reflexology  
COST Varies, depending on treatment; massages are \$100 per hour  
DETAILS 917-627-7243; 666-2820; powertoheal.com