

# Working to heal the mind-body connection

By SARAH MORAN • Contributing Writer

Sixteen students bend, twist and stretch.

Some sit in the prayer position and others lie on mats, moving and strengthening different parts of their bodies.

The teacher, Matthew Sanford, wraps up with a breathing meditation.

"Thank your body," he tells them. It's a message that drives his personal and professional life.

The students — young and old, male and female — get up from the floor. Most return to their wheelchairs with the help of several volunteers.

The unique adaptive yoga class has been offered for more than a decade at the

Courage Center in Golden Valley, which has seen success by strengthening the connection between mind and body.

"The biggest thing people are getting from the class is they're more connected to their entire body after an injury or illness," said Carrie Shogren, an occupational therapist and adaptive yoga assistant at the center. Plus, people end up with better balance, posture and flexibility, she said.

As interest in the mind-body connection grows, she said, health-care professionals from across the country are calling the center to learn more about adaptive yoga and the other initiatives taking place there thanks, in part, to its partnership with Sanford, who was paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident when he was 13.

"I know there's a better way," said Sanford, 44, of Orono. "I know that a mind-body approach to living with a disability transforms the experience, makes it easier and improves your quality of life."

His efforts there and elsewhere recently won him the 2010 Pioneer in Integrative Medicine award, landing him among previous recipients who include Drs. Deepak Chopra, Mehmet Oz and Andrew Weil. Sanford also wrote "Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence" and leads workshops and speaks nationally. He also works with health-care leaders and professionals to help them bring a mind-body approach to their culture and patient interactions.

**Mind-body continues on E8 ►**



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« I KNOW THAT A MIND-BODY APPROACH TO LIVING WITH A DISABILITY TRANSFORMS THE EXPERIENCE. » Matthew Sanford, above, instructing teachers

# Healing the mind and the body

## ◀ MIND-BODY FROM E1

His ties with Courage Center are just one outgrowth of his personal story and of Mind Body Solutions in Minnetonka, a non-profit organization he founded in 2002 that aims to deepen mind-body connections, especially for people dealing with trauma, loss and disability.

The center runs a traditional yoga studio and also offers adaptive yoga classes, free yoga classes for vets, one-on-one sessions and instructional resources. Sanford recently shared his views, which have been edited for space:

**Q** You've said, "Healing is an art, and we've gotten lost in thinking it's just a science." Have you seen a shift in this mentality, or is change coming?

**A** The fact that Mind Body Solutions even exists, that the Courage Center is doing the innovative things they're doing, that I'm sought after nationally to speak — it shows the culture and health care system are realizing a more integrative approach is necessary. You have to treat the whole person. All of us sense the health care system is not sustainable, we can't afford it and it's not helping us heal to our fullest potential ... We need to focus more on prevention and helping people be healthy before they get sick.

**Q** What makes a mind-body approach to health so powerful?

**A** It's a simple idea — if you're more connected to your body, you're going to take better care of it. When you're more connected, you become a better steward of your body. You become more present, and maybe you decide it would feel good to exercise a little. You listen to your body and get help right away when you need it.

People need to know this and learn to bring their minds and bodies together. We need to be more proactive in our own health. The mind-body approach has the best chance

## FOR MORE INFO ON ...

Mind Body Solutions, go to [www.mindbodysolutions.org](http://www.mindbodysolutions.org) or call 952-473-3700.

Matthew Sanford, go to [www.matthewsanford.com](http://www.matthewsanford.com)

for maintaining health for a lifetime.

**Q** What are small steps people can take toward integrating mind and body and living a more peaceful life?

**A** What's happening is we're not paying attention to our bodies. When you pay attention, you realize that sitting up straight with good posture isn't a moral issue — it just feels better. You realize it's more nourishing to breathe through your nose. It feels better to take a walk, or to appreciate the beauty that's all around you.

Everyone thinks they don't have enough time. But that's a habit you fall into. Everyone has the same amount of time. You have to make some choices to be a little quieter and to sit still — even for just a few minutes a day.

**Q** If someone's dealing with a challenge such as chronic disease or physical disability, what's a helpful way for them to view their body?

**A** Living with a chronic condition or disability is itself a spiritual practice, an incredible teacher. It makes you more compassionate.

Remember that the body will always strive toward living with every ounce of its energy, without abandon. Be grateful that it's moving toward living and find a way to move together with your body for the rest of your life. You have to respect it. Your body is doing the best it can with what it's been dealt. Even if it's in pain or isn't doing what you want it to, your body is still the best home your mind will ever have.

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Matthew Sanford says that being in touch with one's body leads people to make wiser choices and ultimately improves health.