

How Pilates can Improve Breast Cancer Survival



By now, there's little dispute that Pilates can give you a leaner, stronger body. Devotees also wax poetic about the therapeutic, mental benefits they find in Pilates' demand for concentration and focus. However, Pilates can also be a lifesaver. Literally.

Increasing the Odds of Survival

For women with a personal history of breast cancer, exercise is critical. Recently, scientists have linked exercise to helping women survive breast cancer and live longer.

Even though breast cancer survivors might feel sore, exhausted and sick, experts agree that even gentle exercise increases the odds of survival, not to mention aiding in managing weight gain due to chemotherapy and improving overall outlook.

"It makes you feel like you're back in control again," says breast cancer survivor and exercise physiologist **Doreen Puglisi**. Puglisi is the creator of The Pink Ribbon Program, a series of modified Pilates exercises designed to help breast

cancer survivors improve the range of motion in their arms, shoulders and other affected areas following surgery.

Pilates is so versatile, and so many modifications exist, that nearly everyone can study it to some degree. Joseph Pilates first created the exercises during World War I in an English internment camp for German citizens. Many had been wounded in the war and were recuperating. This is why so many of the exercises are done in a seated or lying position. A testament to the therapeutic benefits of Pilates, not one of Joe's trainees died during the deadly influenza epidemic that struck England in 1918.

Puglisi first recognized a need for some kind of specialized program for breast cancer survivors in 1998 while she worked as an exercise physiologist. In so many cases, survivors are sent home from the hospital with a smattering of exercises—and no prescription for physical therapy. The first time a survivor tries to wash her hair and finds that she can't lift her arm high enough, she realizes just how much she needs help.

The Pink Ribbon Program offers three phases, each lasting two to four weeks. Initially, the focus is solely on increasing range of motion. Then, survivors begin to incorporate Pilates-based movements, and finally, they begin to work the body out more fully.

All About Range of Motion

Puglisi researched breast cancer survivors specifically and found contraindications that prevent them from doing a lot of exercises. For example, many shouldn't grip anything tightly with their hands, nor should they lift more than 10 pounds. For these and other reasons, Puglisi felt that Pilates made the most sense.

"It was just this natural evolution where I said, 'God, Pilates would really work for these women,'" she remembers. "Pilates is all about range of motion."

So she modified Pilates exercises to help breast cancer survivors regain lost range of motion and live pain-free. Two years later, Puglisi was forced to personally evaluate her own program. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. "I became a patient," she says.

Puglisi opted for a mastectomy and had some lymph nodes taken out. She began her own program about six weeks following her surgery. Her cancer was caught very early, but her surgery left her with severely limited range of motion. She says she got through four exercises and was exhausted. "It was really quite painful," she remembers.

Puglisi says she took a step back and realized that her program had to adapt to meet survivors, depending on where they were in the recovery process. "It's one thing knowing it, it's another thing actually experiencing it," she says. "I was really able to fine-tune it because I, myself, was going through it."

Moving Past the Point of Comfort

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The goal of the program is to increase the breast cancer survivor's range of motion and educate her about her own body's limitations so she can feel comfortable in a mainstream Pilates class. Plus, it doesn't matter if the survivor is two months post-op or two years. Range of motion can be recaptured to a large degree and survivors can live pain-free.

"In order to get your range of motion to increase, you have to move past the point of comfort," points out Puglisi. It's extremely difficult to train yourself to do that, as Puglisi found when she began rehabilitating herself.

In order to meet the needs of breast cancer survivors more fully, Puglisi began a certification program about 18 months ago in which Pilates instructors, physical therapists and other fitness instructors can be trained in her method.

She has trained 75 instructors nationwide so far, and will personally travel to train anyone willing to host her three-day certification program.

Instructors need not be Pilates teachers, but they must have a background in movement and science. Puglisi says she focuses on training instructors in assessing breast cancer survivors because many don't really know how to properly do that, and it's critical to the success of the survivor.

Classes are kept small so survivors get more one-on-one attention, and Puglisi has found that the classes become important support systems for survivors. "There's wonderful support groups out there for breast cancer survivors," she says. "But, I really like this because it's not just talking amongst people who have been through that experience; they're actually doing something really positive and trying to move forward."

Finding Her Mission

The Pink Ribbon Program is unique because of Puglisi's personal history of breast cancer and that knowledge is important to survivors. "When survivors know [the program] was designed by a survivor, they feel much more comfortable, and they're more willing to kind of open up a little bit, and that helps too," she points out.

Puglisi says she feels that she has really found her mission in the Pink Ribbon Program and is grateful for her personal experience. "Of course, if I didn't have breast cancer, it would be fabulous," she says. "But, everything good has come out of it, so I really can't even complain."

Her next project is creating a DVD and booklet for women with breast cancer that she hopes the medical community will embrace and distribute to survivors immediately after their surgery. On it, she includes the first phase of her program, which will help survivors get on the road to recovering as fully as possible. "They need to know there's stuff out there that they can do, and it definitely does get better," emphasizes Puglisi.

Exercise in general, and Pilates in particular, provide critical physical benefits to breast cancer survivors. But, the mental relief it can also give is just as critical. "Every time I reached into the kitchen cupboard I would feel really uncomfortable and it was a constant reminder of, 'Oh my God, I just had surgery,'" says Puglisi. "Once that tightness went away, I kind of forgot."

In this case, forgetting is its own kind of special blessing.

For more information, visit www.pinkribbonprogram.com. ■