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Exercising Your Will to Survive

Jenny Ahn

The morning of her mastectomy and TRAM flap reconstruction, Annie Toglia took an intensive power walk with a group of her closest friends. It was the best medicine she could've had before a long and arduous road to recovering her body, mind, and soul, she said. She walked into the hospital with an empowering walk behind her and a sense that she was the one in control—not the cancer.

Breast cancer is the leading cancer site among women, second only to lung cancer. It will kill an estimated 39,800 women this year, according to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. The diagnosis alone can be a devastating blow, said Toglia.

"Your spirit becomes weakened just by the fact that you've been diagnosed," she said, adding that every little crisis seems discouraging. "If your blood count is low, you're traumatized by that," she said.

But one of the best things a woman can do for herself once she's been diagnosed is exercise, said Toglia. It doesn't have to be anything strenuous; just following a few simple steps can make a drastic difference. As a medical exercise specialist, seasoned sports medicine trainer and breast cancer survivor, Toglia knows what she's talking about when she touts the physiological benefits of exercise.

"One of the components of exercise is the endorphin release, which helps fight depression," she said.

And when you're in the fight for your life, increasing your drive, stamina and overall sense of well-being can be crucial to surviving, she said. Studies have shown that maintaining a "fighting spirit" can help women cope with breast cancer, she added. And speaking from personal experience, Toglia said exercise helped her achieve a feeling of calmness and control at a time when she felt like nothing was in her control.

And that's why Toglia has become a woman on a mission to convey the message that exercise is an integral part of a breast cancer patient's recovery not only physically but also psychologically and emotionally.

She's written a 111-page book entitled *Staying Abreast, Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery* that entails a chronologically formatted fitness program for breast cancer patients with 11 separate workouts. The book is periodized into several phases that coincide with stages of illness and recovery--immediately post-surgery, up to six weeks post-surgery, ten weeks post surgery, and above and beyond. The book is the most extensive fitness program for breast cancer patients with various phases focused on different conditioning the body during the process of short-term and long-term recovery.

Toglia's Web site, www.Stayingabreast.com, includes information from the book, e.g., an outline of general program goals such as elevating endorphin levels, preventing lymphedema (a swelling often in the arms or legs caused by an accumulation of lymph fluid), preventing the formation of scar tissue and frozen shoulder, restoring upright posture after surgery and most importantly increasing one's "fighting spirit."

But Toglia isn't just satisfied educating patients; she's taking her message to educate medical and rehab professionals because they play a crucial role in intervention, she said.

"If patients were advised before hand and had a sheet of exercises, they'd know to start exercising and continue to do them after the surgery and during treatments," she said.

Toglia's first public seminar on breast cancer rehabilitation for medical and rehab professionals and students will be March 22 at Beth Israel Medical Center, Manhattan, N.Y. Other speakers are Anthony C. Cahan, MD, FACS, Bonnie Lasinski, MA, PT, CLT-LANA, and Meryle Richman, PT, MS, CST. For more information contact Annie Toglia at (914)-237-1779 or info@stayingabreast.com or call Mary Fischer, Director-Rehab Therapies, Beth Israel, at (212)-420-2738.

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