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FIT for LIFE

Breast cancer survivors rely on exercise regimens to work toward recovery

Joy Victory
The Journal News

As she anticipated having a double mastectomy, fitness instructor Ellen Pollack felt more like a science project than a woman.

It was her cancerous breasts, and not her, that had the attention of doctors. It was her blood cells, not her moods, that were under the microscope. But oncology — or the study and treatment of cancer — can be like that. So much emphasis is put on eradicating the cancer that the person may become more parts than sum.

Thankfully, however, Pollack had a solution to feeling like a science project: exercise.

"If you start doing Pilates work, you're really integrating your whole body," Pollack says, referring to a type of exercise that involves deep stretching and muscle conditioning. "You're not just dissecting your body, which can happen when you're undergoing surgery."

Two weeks after surgery, Pollack was already walking on a treadmill and stretching. A few weeks later, she was back to teaching spin and Pilates classes at Club Fit in Briarcliff Manor and Jefferson Valley.

Most importantly, her return to exercise routine made her feel whole again.

"If you're moving and feeling connected to yourself, it feels like spiritually I'm here and in one piece," says Pollack, who lives in Yorktown Heights.

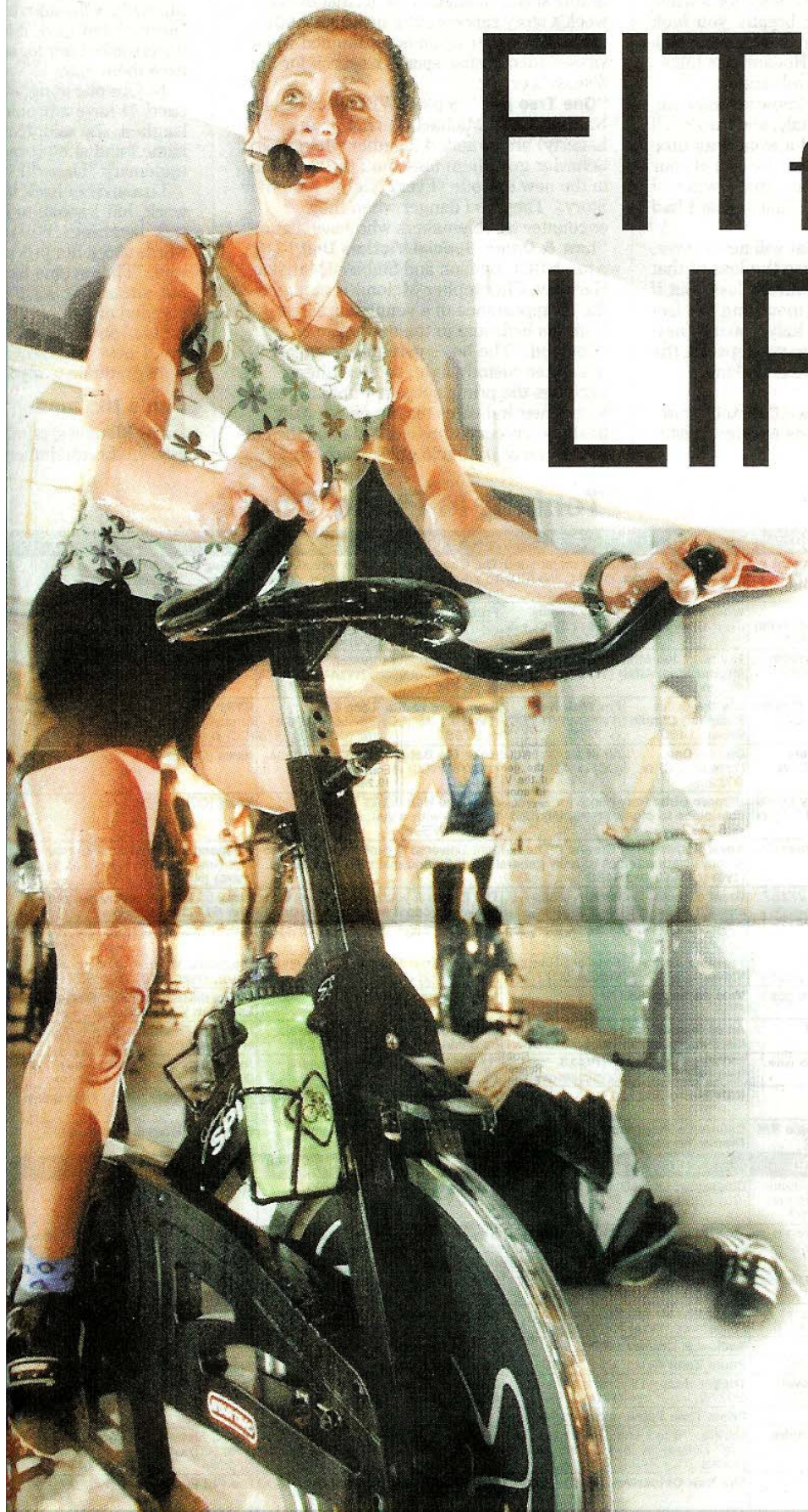
It's no secret that exercise is a vital component of good health. Exercising not only strengthens and slims the body, but it also elevates "happy hormones" such as serotonin and endorphin.

Exercise has been making headlines recently as a

Please see EXERCISE, 3E

Ellen Pollack teaches a spinning class at Club Fit in Briarcliff Manor. Pollack, 40, recently underwent a double mastectomy for breast cancer.

Carmen Troesser/The Journal News



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Exercise is key to recovery

EXERCISE, from 1E

way to prevent breast cancer. Yet that doesn't tell the whole story: Yes, exercise may prevent breast cancer, but it also radically improves the health and well-being of breast cancer survivors, especially right after surgery and chemotherapy.

For example, a 2001 controlled study by Canada's Ottawa Regional Cancer Center found that exercise "not only 'improved physical function and controlled weight gain in patients undergoing adjuvant therapy for breast cancer,' but also 'patients perceive it as a way to help control their own destiny in their fight against the disease, and are very highly motivated,'" according to a published report from the American Cancer Society.

That's not shocking news to Pollack, or her good friend Suzie Roth, also a breast cancer survivor. The two underwent surgery and treatment around the same time earlier this year. Like Pollack, Roth made exercise a vital part of her recovery. She attends spin classes and lifts weights at Club Fit in Jefferson Valley.

"I really think most people who are physically fit would opt to continue down that path," Roth says.

For Rafael Brache of Putnam Valley, being able to exercise meant his life was back on track. He was treated for breast cancer more than a year ago. He's also a prostate cancer survivor.

"When I was diagnosed, I was going to the gym, and playing tennis three times a week," Brache said. He took a six-week break during chemotherapy because of exhaustion.

"But I did get back to tennis and the gym," he says. "I find, like many people, it was just as important emotionally as it was physically because it was getting back to what I would call 'normal.' Just getting to the gym was a real uplift."

Like many patients who have a mastectomy and removal of armpit lymph nodes, Brache had lost some upper-body strength and flexibility. He sought a physical therapist's advice, and now incorporates special range-of-motion exercises to each of his workouts.

"I think my backhand is even better now," Brache jokes, who admits he "has a pretty good head as far as optimism goes."

Optimism is precisely what breast cancer survivors some-

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Annie Toglia

times struggle to maintain, says Annie Toglia, a medical exercise specialist and author of "Staying Abreast: Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery."

Exercise, because of its dual physical and mental benefits, can sometimes be just the ticket for depressed breast cancer survivors, she says.

"There's this feeling that my life is over. I'm disfigured," says Toglia, a survivor herself. "Also, (exercise) saves whatever flexibility is there. To get that basic quality-of-life and functional ability, like lifting a pot of boiling water."

"Staying Abreast" has explicit directions for dozens of exercises designed to increase range-of-motion and decrease pain and stiffness. It also addresses special concerns for people recovering from chemotherapy or mastectomies, such as preventing lymphedema, a painful and dangerous accumulation of lymphatic fluid.

Toglia believes in the benefits of exercise so much that if it were up to her, all women and men with breast cancer would be able to go specialized physical therapy centers, similar to already existing cardiac rehabilitation centers for heart attack survivors.

"It's so incredibly sad that so many people accept the fact that they're slightly incapacitated without knowing they could be better than they were before," says Toglia, of New Rochelle.

In fact, even today many survivors are given little information about recovering from a mastectomy; a major surgery with plenty of potential complications, Toglia says.

For example, after her mastectomy, survivor Lora Schultz of Somers was simply told to practice climbing her hands up a wall. Anything more strenuous was not advised, she says.

But as soon as she felt healthy enough, she resumed her dance and power sculpting classes.

"I couldn't wait to get back to exercising," she says. "It's important for your mind and body."

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