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"Annie's Story: You can survive with fitness" by Ellen Foley

ELLEN, *the anti-athlete*: When Annie Toglia found out she had breast cancer in 1996, she tried to keep it a secret.



Today, she is reaching out all over the world with a message to breast cancer survivors: Make fitness part of your recovery.

She's written a book that contains exercises and continually counsels breast cancer survivors from her [Web site](#).

A former personal fitness trainer who is also trained as a dancer, Toglia has survived Stage IV breast cancer. She decided early on that she was going to beat the disease and fitness would be part of her arsenal. Sixteen surgeries later, the 40-something resident of West Chester County in New York calls her recovery nothing short of "miraculous."

The miracle happened so I could bring this book to the world," she said. Her book, called "Staying Abreast, Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery" (\$65) by Annie Toglia, MES, ACSM, CSCS, can be ordered through the Web site. It shows exercises and gives survivors tips on the special issues they experience: weight gain during chemotherapy, a new center of gravity after the loss of a breast, and posture issues, among others. The information, along with the Web site, empowers women to ask their doctors for more than the standard level of care, according to Toglia.



The book only tells part of the Toglia survival story. Her Web site and conversation tells the rest. She had to quit working and went broke. She's still trying to figure out a way to use her "gift" of a survival tale and to support herself financially. Grit and optimism got her this far; contact with other survivors pushes her on.

Toglia's message is echoing not only in the lives of patients but also in the medical community where fitness has not been an important part of recovery programs, she said.

She describes the experience many breast cancer survivors have when presented after surgery with an impersonal and uninspiring piece of paper detailing exercises:

"Here's a person, lying in bed and I'm probably going to have to have chemo and gain 20 pounds and lose my hair. Here's this piece of paper. I think I'll go home and do some exercises?" she asks incredulously.

Women need the medical community to get more proactive in using fitness to promote healing, she said. Occupational therapists and physical therapists need more training; doctors need more awareness; the health care system needs to make quality physical therapy available to post-surgical patients to avoid debilitating side effects such as frozen shoulder and lymphedema, an abnormal swelling of the hand or arm that can be permanent and can be associated with infection.

Toglia recently has done seminars for doctors, nurses and other health professionals in her campaign to enlist their support for post-surgical treatment. Her latest mission is to get the book to women before they have the surgery, when they are feeling well and optimistic, rather than waiting until they are recovering from surgery and the inevitable feelings of loss.

Her doctor told her when she had her surgery that there are two kinds of breast cancer surgery patients: One gets up and walks around after surgery; the other lies in bed. "And she's likely to stay there," Toglia said. The latter patient's recovery is likely to be slower and more difficult.

Toglia was up walking around with her IV in the hospital and she credits her "breast cancer posse," a group of new friends in the cancer recovery community, as the inspiration for her stamina in the face of a deadly diagnosis. She is trying to boil down the book into a pamphlet for those who can't afford the 100-plus tome's hefty price and she's strategizing how to form a nonprofit organization that can supply hospitals with information from her book.

A conversation with Toglia leaves you breathless. Breast cancer took away her life, she said. Clearly, Toglia has taken it back and delivers on her quest to give the rest of us "little packages of hope."

For more on Toglia's life story and current activities, go to her Web site, www.stayingabreast.com. You can e-mail her from that location.