



## Survival of the **Fittest**

One woman's fight produced a rehabilitative program for all breast cancer patients.

**A**nnie Toggia of Bronxville, N.Y., a medical exercise specialist and fitness trainer, dedicated much of her life to helping clients attain peak

physical condition. But her professional and personal focus changed in April 1996 when she discovered that she had stage IV breast cancer. She sought treatment and had numerous procedures, including two mastectomies, chemotherapy courses, back-to-back stem-cell transplants and experimental cancer vaccine treatments. In her weakened state, Annie found herself unable to carry out simple daily functions such as lifting grocery bags and opening doors.

Annie began physical therapy immediately after surgery. But she quickly realized there were no comprehensive rehabilitative programs specifically designed for breast cancer patients recovering from surgeries. With her extensive background as a physical trainer, her desire to regain her strength after surgery and the support of her medical team, Annie's career marked a significant change. Her clientele shifted from healthy athletes to recovering breast cancer patients as she began to work on her book, *Staying Abreast, Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery*.

Throughout recovery, Annie was an unusual sight in the hospital hallways as she exercised with IV pole in hand. In collaboration with her medical team Annie developed a comprehensive rehabilitative program for all recovering breast cancer patients, regardless of fitness level, which includes 11 different programs at various stages of treatment. "Several exercises performed daily for a total of 15 to 20 minutes can effect amazing gains in strength, flexibility and endurance for a post-op patient," says Annie.

Both Annie's book, in press since January 2002, and her Website ([www.stayingabreast.com](http://www.stayingabreast.com)), launched in November 2000,

are the result of generous donations and loans from friends and family. Besides monetary donations, the gifts included computers, publicity, complete Website design, logo and cover photography. "What is really incredible is the magic of the generosity behind this book," says Annie.

Doctors present her work at national conferences, and her book is in the hands of many health professionals. "As a result, I frequently receive calls from around the world asking about my program," she says. Physical and occupational therapists and nurses are starting programs at hospitals and clinics based on her exercises. Annie herself is conducting workshops for numerous medical, rehabilitative and fitness practitioners.

Considering that her mother is a breast cancer survivor and she has lost two aunts and her grandmother to the disease, Annie is very fortunate to have been in remission for six years. She believes her survival is a miracle directly related to exercise and sheer will to fight. With her program, she hopes other women will experience a similar gift. **c&y**

Annie's book is available at [www.stayingabreast.com](http://www.stayingabreast.com).

### **Staying Abreast Exercise**

Phase 1 is a series of simple exercises Annie created to be performed as soon as possible after surgery, intended to prevent swelling and tightness, to relieve discomfort and muscle tension and to promote healing. Below is a sample Phase 1 exercise.

**BACK BAR, SIDE PUSH:** Stand as straight as possible. Hold the stick behind you against your body, palms up and hands about 2½ feet apart. Keep arms straight and gently lift the stick, exhaling as you lift to a comfortable point. Rock the stick as far to the left as possible, then center and then as far to the right as possible, breathing slowly to relieve pain in the upper body. Try to isolate the movement in the shoulders. Return stick to center and relax. Repeat full exercise five to six times.

