

How Pilates Helped Me Regain My Strength and My Life After Cancer by Christal Ferlisi



My first Pilates class was a shock. I thought I was strong and fit. Since college I had been an avid fan of daily cardio and strength training. As I struggled I looked around the class. I couldn't believe that people who looked like they could have retired a decade ago were doing these moves with such grace and seeming ease!

That first class launched me into a six-year journey into the Pilates world. There I practiced Pilates and then practiced some more. It was a happy day when I was at last certified by the Physical Mind Institute for mat and apparatus. I had no idea that I would soon face the most physically challenging event of my life: breast cancer.

I had a routine screening mammogram. I was certain that I would be the last person to get cancer. There was absolutely no family history of any type of cancer. Longevity runs in the family, not cancer! My grandmother was nearly 104 when she died. As a registered dietitian I made it my business to eat a healthy diet with plenty of veggies, fruit, whole grains. I didn't smoke, wasn't overweight, and I exercised for a living! I had breast fed all five of my children. I had all the bases covered for lowering my risk for breast cancer. But as the wife of a physician, I knew the value of following the screening guidelines established by the American Cancer Society, so I dutifully had my annual mammogram.

A cancer diagnosis is a life changing event. Suddenly life is a series of scans, physical exams, MRI's, ultrasounds, blood work. A team of medical specialists poke, prod, consult, and discuss treatment options. A plan is formulated, launched and one is swept along, not really knowing what to expect, but understanding that time is of the essence. Catching it before it spreads, have to catch it before it spreads, is on everyone's mind, if not their lips. One strangely finds herself simultaneously both the central focus and the isolated bystander in this foreign land of cancer. A competent team of dedicated specialists assembles. They that have been down this road many times, and this time I must join them.

My surgeon decided that a lumpectomy was the surgery of choice for my cancer. Unfortunately, the pathologist found that there wasn't a wide cancer free border all around the tumor, so a second lumpectomy had to be performed.

I was given a month to recover from the surgery then on to the next phase of treatment: the dreaded chemotherapy. While I wasn't looking forward to the prospects of chemotherapy, neither I nor any of my doctors were anticipating the enormity of the

ordeal ahead. The infusion of the chemotherapy was uneventful but I had an allergic reaction to the chemotherapy – this is not common but it does happen,

I was released from the hospital a week later. I was so weak I could barely walk the few steps from the wheelchair to the car. It was as if I were in a stranger's body. This alien body was shaky, weak, feeble. Walking from the bedroom to the living was an athletic event leaving me exhausted. Returning to normal activities seemed like an impossible dream.

Regaining my health and strength has been a slow, challenging process. I started with a modified, very modified, Pilates program of 5-7 minutes. Slowly, I rehabilitated my ravaged body using the same remarkable method that had enabled me to achieve a fitness level capable of withstanding an incredibly toxic onslaught.

This July will mark the one-year anniversary of the completion of my cancer treatment. Reflecting back over this past 18 months, I've come to realize that, while unaware of it at the time, my Pilates training was equipping and preparing my body for a life and death struggle. Today I have almost completely regained my strength with the exception of my hands. And I am happy to report that I am more flexible now than I was before cancer.

The spiritual and emotional support of family and friends together with the physical and mental training and conditioning of Pilates have been my road back to a healthy body, a tranquil soul and a joyful spirit. And for that, I am so thankful!

Evans Ph.D, William J and Gerald Secor Couzens. Astro Fit. New York: the Free Press, 2002. Print

Physicalmind Institute, Osteoporosis Exercise Protocols. New York: Physicalmind Institute, 2010. Print

CISN Statement

We do not endorse any practice / product or make any medical claims – the information above is a personal story that others may find informative.