

Pilates and Breast Cancer

NOTE: This article was written by Mary Bange, a Houston-based Peak PilateSystem® Certified Trainer and Cancer Exercise Specialist through the [Pink Ribbon Program](#). In honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Peak Pilates has asked Mary to share her experiences regarding teaching Pilates to those in treatment.

In recognition of her contribution, Peak Pilates will donate \$500 to Mary's charity of choice, [Komen Houston Race for the Cure](#).

Almost 20 years ago my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. None of her doctors prescribed physical therapy even though the treatments restricted the movement of her affected arm and left her unable to perform some basic tasks. I remember her frustration as she would try to do simple daily activities: reach the top shelf, style her hair, apply make-up, or shuffle cards.

Today, early stage breast cancer has an excellent prognosis with a five-year survival rate of over 90 percent. Currently, more than two million women in North America are breast cancer survivors. Despite the good news, cancer treatments take an enormous toll: in just a year of treatment, the body can age a decade. Side effects may include fatigue, pain, weight gain, nausea, muscle atrophy and premature bone loss. Breast surgery frequently results in decreased strength and range of motion of the affected shoulder and arm. Increasingly, research shows that physical activity can benefit women in many ways. Yet, even today, women are often released after surgery with little more direction for their physical rehabilitation than an instruction sheet listing a few exercises.

At the time of my mother's diagnosis, I was pursuing a Ph.D. in Finance. Several years ago, I made a career change from business school academic to fitness professional. While researching Pilates certification programs, I discovered The Pink Ribbon Certification Program. This program, founded by Doreen Puglisi M.S., was created to help health/fitness professionals design safe and effective Pilates-based exercise programs to meet the goals of the breast cancer survivor. Recalling my mother's experience, being able to use my training to help breast cancer survivors improve their quality of life was very appealing to me.

The Pink Ribbon Certification Program is taught over two days. During the course you learn the different types of breast cancer, the types of surgeries, and the adjuvant treatments. The course covers how specific surgeries and treatments affect the survivors' physical recovery and their implications for exercise. You also learn precautions that need to be taken for lymphedema. The course includes range of motion exercises, resistance exercises, and movement sequencing.

A successful training program normally begins with a private meeting with the client. With approval from her physician, this initial meeting takes place two weeks or more after a survivor's related surgery. During this meeting, I get a full health history to determine what type of surgery and treatment each survivor has undergone and the resulting implications for movement. After listening to the client's goals and evaluating all the information provided, I propose an exercise-specific program designed to achieve the desired goals.

The program has three phases; each phase takes two to four weeks, building on the earlier phases. In the first phase, the focus is on the range of motion of the affected area; breathing and alignment are also emphasized. In phase two, range-of-motion exercises continue and stability exercises are introduced. Core stabilization and strength also become a focus. In phase three, the focus is on adding strength to the affected area, including resistance-based exercises; then a full-body workout is added to the mix. By the end of the third phase, the survivor should be prepared to "mainstream" into a regular fitness program, fully understanding her own limitations.

At first I was afraid that working with cancer survivors would be emotionally draining. It has turned out to be just the opposite. Fatigue, both during and after treatment, is the biggest issue many cancer survivors face, so they truly appreciate that I can tailor a workout to how they are feeling that day and they are thankful for how energized they feel after their workout. One client, who had to write down things she would have remembered prior to her treatment, told me repeatedly how the concentration and focus Pilates required were helping with her "chemo

brain.” I will never forget the “high-five” from a client when she had regained enough strength to complete the basic reformer workout. At home, she was using this new-found strength to be able to pick up her nine-month old son.

I wish this program had been around twenty years ago. I think it is a great program to help coach survivors through recovery.

If you have any questions, I can be reached at maryb@fastmail.fm. You can also visit my website at www.marybange.com.

- Mary Bange, Ph.D.