

New Movement: Alternative Therapy and Breast Cancer

Lorene Hayes is a survivor. After being diagnosed with breast cancer 10 years ago, at the age of 48, Hayes opted for a fairly traditional treatment plan: a mastectomy (along with reconstruction), followed by chemotherapy and radiation. The program was successful, and today, Hayes is considered cured.

Of course, the real story of a survivor is not so simple.

According to the American Cancer Society, the five-year survival rate for all women diagnosed with breast cancer is 89 percent (meaning that 89 out of 100 patients will survive for at least five years; most will never experience a recurrence). If the cancer is detected before it has spread, that rate jumps to 98 percent. In ways, the medical field has become fairly adept at conquering breast cancer.

Still, when Hayes embarked on her treatment and rehabilitation, "I had goals other than just getting rid of cancer," she says. "I wanted to optimize my own health."

Breast cancer treatment comes with a variety of risks and consequences, the most serious being lymphedema, a swelling of the limbs frequently related to the removal of lymph nodes (a common component of treatment). Preventing this potentially serious complication is important, and back when Hayes was diagnosed, patients were told to never lift more than five pounds with the arm on the side affected by their surgeries; tennis buffs often had to give up the game.

Additionally, such surgical procedures have long-lasting effects on patients' movement and flexibility. During breast reconstruction, for example, doctors often remove muscle

from the upper back or stomach, creating an imbalance that can cause tension and pain in the chest, limbs, spine and more. Scarring also changes how a body can stretch and move.

It is these secondary effects that frustrate patients even once they have been proclaimed cured. Fortunately for Hayes, she met Stephanie Davies, an occupational therapist and owner of **SD REHAB** (1962 N. Bissell St., 773.477.7599, sdrehab.com). Using a combination of the Feldenkrais Method®, Pilates (particularly STOTT®) and GYROTONIC® (a kind of moving yoga), Davies helps patients regain movement in their chest and arms and, perhaps most importantly, "helps them reconnect with a part of their body that they have been protecting, one that has been scarred," she says.

"I became so much more aware of my own body. I noticed how I was overcompensating for my asymmetry," says Hayes, who had muscle removed from her abdomen for a type of reconstruction called TRAM flap. "My work with Stephanie helped prevent lymphedema, but it also made me stronger and gave me better posture. It encouraged me to look at my contribution to life in general, and being healthy is a huge part of that. I'm back down to the weight I was at in my 20s. Becoming more confident physically helped my emotional state. I feel healthier now than I did before my diagnosis."

Susie Rodriguez, another one of Davies' clients, was

diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. She initially turned to Davies for help in restoring normal range of motion in her right arm. "She also helped me work with my core. It's not just about my arm moving; it's about engaging all of my muscles and about being aware of what I'm doing myself to affect my healing," she says.

Rodriguez's healing also became about more than her physical condition. "You wouldn't think that losing this little part of your body would hurt so much, but it does," she says. "I had that moment of asking 'Is anyone ever going to love me?' [My work with Davies] is about learning to accept myself now and saying, 'I'm alive.'"

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