

Fighting cancer with exercise

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"Let's push it!" and "Here's how!" That's the message delivered by most personal trainers and exercise specialists, whose main roles are to help motivate people and guide them on how to exercise safely and effectively.

But what if the person they're trying to motivate is a cancer patient, someone who is battling or recovering from the dreaded disease? For those fitness specialists whose clients are facing the big "C," their job is both more urgent and more delicate.

Research over the past decade has heightened our understanding of how regular exercise improves recovery from cancer and reduces chances of a recurrence. Yet some of the very things that enable cancer survival — chemotherapy, radiation and surgery — can be downright debilitating, so that pushing too hard can backfire and hinder recovery.

Maintaining that fine balance — providing something that is badly needed, but only just enough of it — is a challenge that three local exercise specialists take on regularly. Here's a look at the driving philosophies of Mary Lenari, John Orsborn and Ed Trayers, three fitness experts for whom working with cancer patients is a key part of their practice.

THOUGH JOHN ORSBORN hasn't lived through a cancer diagnosis, he knows what it's like to overcome something that has the potential to be physically and mentally devastating.

Eight years ago, the doctor of Oriental medicine was so badly injured in a car accident that he had to teach himself how to walk again. Even more noteworthy, Orsborn underwent this recovery largely on his own; his insurance benefits ran out before he had fully recovered

Orsborn credits qi gong with taking him back to full function and health, and for the past two years, he has been sharing the ancient martial art, which emphasizes awareness of qi (energy) in the body and using the mind to guide the qi for improving the health, with people who attend his classes at the Cancer Support Community. He has witnessed first-hand how qi gong has helped people fighting cancer, recovering from its treatment or facing a recurrence. His encouraging stories include a lung cancer survivor who improved her lung capacity from 58 to 73 percent after just six months of regular qi gong.

"We offer a lot of the gentler exercises, not just qi gong, but tai chi, yoga, Pilates, and a special class for breast cancer survivors post-surgery," Orsborn says. "All of these exercises have been

shown to increase your immune system response, increase your aerobic capacity, help you retain strength and flexibility and improve your cardiovascular response."

Orsborn says qi gong in particular is well-suited to people with cancer or recovering from it, because it is easier than tai chi and involves fewer static poses than yoga.

Many qi gong poses can be done while sitting, which makes it especially suitable for those who are fatigued because of radiation or chemotherapy.

Qi gong and the other classes held at Cancer Support Community also focus on mindfulness, which make them especially helpful for cancer patients.

"Intent is very powerful, especially for cancer patients," Orsborn says. "You get that 'C' word thrown at you, and you can go into an emotional spiral, even after surgery or treatment. You've got to have that positive attitude going forward.

"Qi gong really helps you focus inward and forces you to stop and see yourself in a way you haven't before. Once that happens, people realize how much control they can have over their minds and their health."

AS A PERSONAL trainer based at the

YMCA's Frank G. Berlin branch, Mary Lenari is often asked why exercise for cancer patients is any different than exercise for everyone else.

"I always tell them that the exercise is no different," says Lenari, a certified cancer exercise specialist. "But it's how you apply it to the individual, and how you take into account their risk factors and their limitations."

Lenari earned her certification through the Cancer Exercise Training Institute, a group founded by Andrea Leonard-Bruno, a 25-year breast cancer survivor who first became passionate about exercise while helping her own mother recover from two cancer diagnoses.

As part of the training, Lenari spent months learning about different types of cancer, types of treatment, and the possible complications and limiting conditions of each.

"You have to work with cancer patients conservatively, so they are able to improve without doing any further harm," Lenari says.

That conservative approach starts with making sure the basics are covered: being fully hydrated, warming up adequately, focusing on proper breathing and taking the time to cool down.

Assessments are also important, Lenari says. Ideally, someone being treated for cancer or recovering from it has a "baseline" measurement prior to their treatment of things like range of motion and lung capacity. Those baseline measurements make it easier for a trainer to understand how much exertion is too much, because of muscle damage or scar tissue from

surgery. In addition to being educated and informed, Lenari says, sensitivity is among the most important qualities needed in trainers who work with cancer patients.

The trainer needs to be on the lookout for signs of overexertion — shortness of breath, dizziness, disorientation — and needs to encourage their clients to be on the lookout, too.

"You have to be sensitive to their needs and limitations," Lenari says. "People without cancer who are normally active can get depressed over having the flu, not being able to work out for a few days, and fearing they'll 'lose it.' These people, by contrast, have had major surgery and walked a long road. So as a trainer, you need to be sympathetic to the fact that they may not be able to work out for more than 20 minutes."

OVER THE 30 years Ed Trayers has worked as a trainer, he has noticed a steady increase in the number of people coping with cancer. His friends noticed it, too.

"A friend of mine who is a physician told me that 40 years ago, you rarely heard the word 'cancer,' " Trayers says. "Today, you just keep hearing it all the time."

So he decided to study up on the topic, learning about how regular physical activity and proper nutrition can help in recovery from cancer and its treatments. He is now devoted to helping spread word about how pursuing fitness can help fight a disease that many see as unconquerable.

His encouraging stories include a three-time cancer survivor who reduced her cancer markers from 88 to 38 through regular exercise, and another survivor who went skiing within six weeks of his surgery for prostate cancer.

"I want people to understand the need to be out there exercising, because that's what gives you the best fighting chance," Trayers says. "If people just want to get cancer treatments and lay back in bed, they're making a big mistake."

"Not only does exercise reduce nausea from chemotherapy and decrease fatigue during radiation," he says, "it also helps manage anxiety, improve your emotional stability and your mood, and increase your confidence and sense of independence."

Trayers, who works out of Balance Health & Fitness in Sarasota, says he feels a great sense of responsibility to clients he works with who are recovering from cancer, because getting a "good read on them" and helping to protect against overexertion is essential.

"The relationship you build with the person is every bit as important as the exercise itself," Trayers says.

"You've got have compassion. Your clients have to know that you really care for them and are trying to help them, that they have an ally in you. We work together."