

Fighting breast cancer: A Native woman's journal

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Cancer fitness

The muscles in my thighs burn as I climb the 200-foot-long staircase that ascends the hillside park in my neighborhood.

My pace is brisk, a compromise between the sprint desired by the 75-pound collie at the end of the leash I hold, and my own inclination to sit down. My left Achilles tendon aches. I make a mental note to rub her out later. But now I feel my blood moving, despite a breast recently devoid of cancer and a painful scar near my right underarm where doctors biopsied my lymph nodes last month.

When I was diagnosed last January with locally advanced breast cancer, I had visions of lying in bed, wasting away physically and mentally like one of those feeble women who die so melodramatically in old-time black-and-white movies.

"The frightening place for someone dealing with cancer is that I am alone here with my body," said Debbie Rosas, an internationally known fitness expert, author of "The Nia Technique" and resident of Portland, Ore.

I felt, as Rosas described, in the weeks after my diagnosis that my right breast had rebelled against me. At a bookstore, where I'd gone to escape my house, I found a book that changed my perceptions of what it means to be a cancer patient.

In "Cancer Fitness," Anna L. Schwartz, an associate professor at Arizona State University, asserts that exercise - not rest - is critical to cancer patients' ability to heal.

A host of medical studies in the last decade have linked excessive rest by cancer patients to increased fatigue, loss of strength and even prolonged hospitalization, she wrote. Some studies have found that osteoporosis is a long-term side effect in some cancer survivors, a result of treatments.

"People think they're going to get skinny and really sick from chemotherapy," Schwartz told in a phone interview from her Phoenix-area home. "If you exercise you are going to get fitter and faster. A lot of doctors will tell you to exercise, but they won't know what you should do. I wrote this book to get the information out to patients."

Schwartz learned the power of exercise when she was a 24-year-old non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma patient. After growing overweight, depressed and "hopelessly out of shape," the athletic young woman, knowing she needed to exercise and also that she had to take it easy on her body, decided to try bicycling. She didn't know that Gainesville, Fla., where she attended university, was the winter home to world-class cyclists.

Soon she started racing in between treatments, and winning. In time, she set world records still standing for 24 hours on a single bike and for tandem bicycling. She even got to be friends with a guy called Lance Armstrong.

Later, as a nurse practitioner in Flagstaff, Schwartz counseled Hopi and Navajo cancer patients to make walking a family tradition by taking children and grandchildren along.

Schwartz advocates a common-sense approach to exercise. Walking is best. Vary the length of your walk with your treatment schedule. A day or two after chemotherapy, I'd walk around the block with my husband. A week later I'd be back on the hill with a dog, trying to climb those stairs. When I didn't want to go, I'd tell myself, "You already feel bad; how much worse can you feel?" Then grudgingly I'd drudge outside, only to find that the fresh air and motion revived me.

Exercise during my cancer treatment has given me the energy to function almost normally. But when I stopped exercising, out of laziness usually, I'd wind up sluggish and buried in all the side effects of my treatment. While this principle is generally true for healthy people, the difference between exercising or not has been night and day for me since I began cancer treatment.

As I rebuilt my fitness, I wanted to move my body in different ways than just walking. A friend invited me to an exercise class called Nia. I had visions of aerobics classes with instructors shouting directions, overly complicated routines and aching joints.

But I found a room full of women, all barefoot, led in dance by a black drummer with dreadlocks. Our movements were organic, meaning my body moved in directions that felt good to my bones and didn't push me too hard. My back arched like a cat's. My hips wiggled like when I was a child at play. My muscles didn't strain, but I worked up a sweat. I left feeling beautiful and strong, two rare sensations in the early days of cancer treatment.

Knowing not everyone lives where workout class like this are available, I called Rosas, who with her ex-husband developed Nia based on such varied traditions as jazz dance, martial arts and yoga, and asked her what principles people could learn from Nia to use at home. Many exercise ideas are on her Web site, www.nia-nia.com.

She told me that we spend too much time thinking that our body should be like an aerobics instructor's or a runner's. Instead, we should get to know the architecture of our own bodies and we should focus on moving our bodies in the ways they were designed to move.

Put your favorite music on the stereo and start moving your ankles, knees, hips, spine, shoulder, elbows, wrists and fingers in the radius that comes naturally to them. Draw circles in the air with your hands and feet. Flick your fingers in time with the music. If you can't do that, make sounds. Sing, or even make what Rosas calls "pre-verbal sounds." Sound vibrates our chest wall and helps with healing.

I live with three dogs and two cats, so I spend some time copying their grunts, moans and whines. I copy their stretches playfully. They seem to laugh. I have found that the more playful I can be in my movement, the more I can quiet my worries.

The goal of exercise doesn't need to be a perfect "10" body. Instead, the aim ought to be life-sustaining flexibility, agility, strength, mobility and STABILITY. The rule is to repeat movements that feel good. Avoid pain.

"Having cancer in one part of the body can become an all-consuming experience," she said. "The stress is so intense, and the voice: 'I'm sick. I'm sick. I'm sick.' The reality is that the rest of your body is there to heal that part."

Rosas believes cancer patients can develop dialogues through movement with their own bodies, something that may have been missing when the cancer invaded.

I experienced this dialogue in the most literal way during a Nia class last June. That day I was hurting from chronic back pain and decided to work it out through dance. Instinctively I bent at my waist, letting my head and arms feel gravity pull them and my back downward. I swung gently like an elephant might swing her trunk. Then I stood up, reaching my neck and head upward like a giraffe might. I continued for 20 minutes, elephant to giraffe and back again.

Sometime during that dance I heard these words deep inside myself: "A back can't carry the weight of the whole world; can't carry the weight."

Call me crazy, but I started a conversation that day with my body, my old friend who I've taken for granted. I ignored her to the point that one breast had to sacrifice herself to cancer to save the rest of me. Now I'm going to add my body to the list of my most intimate counselors, which includes Creator, the four-leggeds and my husband. Now, it includes my own body.

My life depends upon it.

Kara Briggs is a Yakama journalist from Portland, Ore., where she is currently on medical leave from her job at The Oregonian. She chronicles her battle with breast cancer in this biweekly series. She is a former president of the Native American Journalists Association and winner of the 2004 Award for Investigative Journalism. Contact her by e-mail at k-briggs@earthlink.net.

