

Fitness classes help cancer survivors find a new normal

By Clayton Woullard YourHub Reporter The Denver Post

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Jan Bradford said Dr. Dennie Dorall's fitness class for cancer survivors has made a big impact on her.

"It's something that saved me," said a tearful Bradford, whose breast cancer went into remission eight years ago. "I can go to class and it's going to be OK because it's a normal part of my life."

The class is a new offering through Englewood Parks and Recreation for those who have survived cancer but still deal with the remnants of chemotherapy, radiation and other treatments that can leave the body feeling depleted.

"There is no program out there that takes the time to understand symptomatology and all the things they go through post-treatment," said Dorall, who is a medical doctor, naturopathic doctor, has a doctorate in medical humanities, is a yoga instructor and Ayurvedic practitioner.

Tammy Hariman was first diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease in 2008 and received heavy doses of chemotherapy. Because her tumor was between her heart and lung, it would have been too hard to remove it, so it's essentially dead tissue inside of her that makes doing certain physical activities harder and leaves her winded. Treatment also affected her thyroid, so she has to take medication for it.

"It's very, very hard to find that same sort of normal even though I was in good shape and had never been a smoker," Hariman said.

She said Dorall's class worked on opening up her lymphatic system, which is important in preventing infection and conditions such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Strength conditioning is also emphasized as many people lose muscle connection after radiation.

"We're having to rebuild a person," Dorall said.

She said they want to create lymphatic drainage to prevent people from developing lymphedema.

Treatment can also throw off a survivor's balance, and the strength conditioning and yoga help build that back up, said Margaret Freeman, who had breast cancer in 1998. Bradford said she had to relearn her golf swing.

Dorall said it's important the class be offered at a low cost — \$4.50 per class — because many people are left to fend for themselves after their cancer has gone into remission and their insurance doesn't cover more fitness or wellness classes. She also said many cancer survivors lose their jobs over the course of their treatment.

But for Dorall, teaching these classes isn't just her job. She and her friend since high school planned to open a studio to meet the needs of breast cancer survivors, but the friend died last fall.

"I feel like I'm carrying a little bit of her passion," Dorall said as she teared up. "I just don't want to see that happen to anyone else, so as much as I can keep people in a very positive place, that's important to me."

The fitness class also focuses on the emotional aspects of being a survivor through really encountering what one is feeling, which is especially emphasized in the yoga portion of the class at the end. She said studies from the Mayo Clinic, Stanford University and Johns Hopkins have confirmed people's survival rates are three to five times higher if they do yoga during and after treatment.

"Yoga almost guarantees a better survival rate," Dorall said.

John Shisler, 64, originally was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease at 21, survived that and was diagnosed with soft-tissue cancer in 2009. He credits Dorall's class and overall fitness for his continued survival.

Bradford also liked that Dorall doesn't do the same thing every session and is in tune with the individual needs of the group.

The class takes place every Friday for six weeks at a time, and the next course starts March 7. For more information, call 303-762-2680 or visit englewoodrec.org.

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