



## Exercise as Complementary Therapy

Nancy Litterman Howe

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## Exercise as Complementary Therapy

by Nancy Litterman Howe

*In October 1999, Nancy Litterman Howe celebrated a two-year anniversary marking the end of radiation therapy. That same month, she earned the title NGA Southwest Natural Bodybuilding Overall Champion in open competition in Tucson, Ariz. In November 1999, she won the national title 1999 NPC Western Regional Overall Champion. In April 2000 Nancy planned to compete again, attempting to win the honor of becoming a WNBFF bodybuilding professional.*

I was 42 and an avid amateur athlete. *Runner's World* magazine profiled me in 1990. In the spring of 1997, I began my second year of bodybuilding. A routine exam in May 1997 discovered a slight redness in my throat, which tested negative for strep. By mid-June, I had cancer. A golf-ball-size tumor, stage T-2 and "intrusive in its mass," bulged from my right tonsil, where nothing had been visible five weeks earlier.

To those of you who, daily assist others like me, to travel this path through cancer diagnosis and treatment, I am sending you a postcard to pass along to your patients. The most relevant question that you can help your patients answer is this, "How can we help you prepare for what lies ahead?"

Cancer is not earned; I didn't deserve it. Nothing in my history explained my cancer at age 42, much less the virulent, aggressive strain that took hold of me. We

*Nancy Litterman Howe is a personal trainer at a local country club in Phoenix, Ariz. She also does extensive speaking and writing about the role of exercise in her own recovery from cancer.*

who must begin to live under the long shadow of cancer may develop a sense of fatalism: what will come, will come. Hopefully, we will come to learn how to establish some sense of control. A cancer diagnosis demands that we commit ourselves to living life. I learned that anger is a miserable survival strategy. What works is hope.

We patients need hope, a mountain of it. The hope that I discovered does not rely on miracle cures. My hope was to find joy in rebuilding a strong and vigorous life in spite of cancer. In my experience, exercise produces changes in the body and mind that seem to water the seeds of hope. Finding camaraderie and fellowship in the gym, and watching my body daily gain strength and endurance helped me look forward with optimism.

While I was undergoing radiation therapy, weight lifting wasn't so much about physical improvement as it was about mental survival. As I strained to lift the weights, I was able to focus on my arms and legs rather than the burning in my throat. Certainly the radiation therapy had weakened me. However, I approached my disease like an injured athlete, slowly, methodically, retraining my body. Bodybuilding's emphasis on mental focus and precise physical form was the perfect fit. I passionately embraced it, visiting the gym six times a week for two hours at a time.

Good nutrition was also essential. To regain my strength during and after treatment, I followed a low-fat, high-protein diet with a moderate amount of carbohydrates. Throughout my radiation treatment, my training diet reflected a mix of roughly 50 percent carbohydrate, 40-45 percent protein, and 10-5 percent fat. For the first year

after surgery, nearly all my meals consisted of liquid-meal replacements made for bodybuilders. Today, I maintain the same percentages but eat regular foods: overcooked, mushy vegetables; soft berries; and thin, light fish, such as Orange Roughy. Today, I avoid dairy and drink only soy milk. I use bodybuilding meal replacements only when fish is not available.

I am not a doctor. I am a patient. I have read many studies in medical journals that attest to the benefits of exercise during cancer treatment. (The first article I found, which includes a detailed bibliography, was published in 1997 in *Cancer* 79:1717-22.) Commercial protocols are readily available, and more are being developed each year. (For example, *Cancer, Exercise, Wellness and Rehabilitation, A Guidebook for Health Professionals & Cancer Survivors* by Eric Durak M.Sc., 1999.)

I know that controversy exists regarding the effects of exercise. I do not presume to tell medical professionals how to develop an exercise program specifically oriented to a cancer patient. I have no evidence that the action of rebuilding one's body, inspired by an attendant hope of better things to come, can increase the quality of anyone else's life. I can tell you, however, that I believe my positive approach helped boost my immune system. Perhaps my increased strength enhances my body's ability to fight the disease on a daily basis.

It is premature to award me with the transitional title "cancer survivor." It is my conviction that the psychological effects that emerge from my daily physical activities positively changed my life, and that these positive effects continue to improve the quality of my life. ❧