

Breast cancer pilates in the pink

A rehabilitation and exercise programme designed specifically for women with breast cancer is going nationwide, with the support of the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation.

Set up by Auckland physiotherapist Lou James and breast physician Dr Sonja Freese, Pink Pilates blends pilates, physiotherapy, massage, stretching and breathing techniques.

Bodyright Pilates in Petone is the only place in the Wellington region that offers this service and owner Sue Hamilton says it's an exciting time for the clinical studio.

"We got our certification at the end of last year. The big thing was to have the Breast Cancer Foundation coming on board and supporting it, taking it from an Auckland base to nationwide."

Ms Hamilton says what her team is looking to do is get women with breast cancer to their pre-operative stage of fitness.

"Having a mastectomy and reconstruction is like having three major operations at once. These women usually have a sense of loss of control.

"The cancer itself is symptomatic; it's the treatment which is difficult - losing hair, nausea, chemotherapy."

Bodyright tackles this lack of morale by offering an initial full assessment, followed by one-on-one sessions, 80 percent of which are funded by the Foundation.

"Quite often these women lack confidence and are nervous about starting something new, so having a quiet environment plus one-on-one sessions really helps and eventually they join a Pink Pilates group class."

One woman who has benefited from the programme is Wellington lawyer Penelope Ryder-Lewis. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in March last year and after a bilateral mastectomy and reconstruction, she was given the all-clear to exercise again.

"I found out about Pink Pilates when I picked up a magazine in Koru Club during Breast Cancer Awareness month," she says. "Bodyright was just moving to Petone and I thought it sounded perfect - exercise tailored for people who have been affected by breast cancer."

Ms Ryder-Lewis started Pink Pilates from late October and asserts that most women affected by breast cancer want their strength, posture, and most importantly, their confidence, back.

"The pilates helped enormously. It helped me morally; it was so nice to exercise again and the positive reinforcement I got made me do, and feel, better. You feel good because each time you can do a bit more.

"They tailor it for you which is what attracted me to it. When I first got there, I was asked if I could do 25 step-ups. I could, but there are people who can't so they'll tailor that woman's programme differently. Most importantly, it's safe; it feels safe and they make sure you're never doing anything that's not safe."

Ms Hamilton says making sure the women aren't doing anything they're not ready for is key to ensuring their comfort.

"We do research and report back on our clients. Sonja Freese attends and talks at overseas conferences about this programme; she's keen on research so information goes towards how we can improve; the programme is constantly updated. "You can actually see the results in these women - they walk taller, feel fitter - there's a huge difference. It's like hope has been handed to them on a plate."

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