

The fighting back technique



WE HEAR HOW PILATES AND BARRE TEACHER SHELLY KNIGHT RESPONDED TO STAGE 0 BREAST CANCER AND HOW PILATES BECAME HER UNIFYING FORCE.

by Shelly Knight

As women, we often don't give ourselves enough credit, for doing it all and being it all things to all the people in our lives. It often means we don't find the time to tune into ourselves and our bodies and make time for routine checkups. While the latter might be true for most, I had always made one thing a priority, yearly mammograms. My mother is a breast cancer survivor so this was a non-negotiable in my busy life.

When I was diagnosed with Breast Cancer, my recent mammogram did not detect anything. I also underwent genetic testing, which came back negative. Despite my attentiveness to my body, I initially dismissed a sensation as hormonal, given that my mammogram in May 2022 had indicated no concerns. Later, in the autumn, while my son was seated on my lap, I encountered an intense, glass-like pain that pierced through my breast. Prompted by this experience, I conducted a thorough examination and discovered a small, pea-sized lump. Consequently, I proceeded with an ultrasound and subsequently a biopsy.

With two decades of experience teaching Pilates and barre, I recently established a new barre-Pilates studio near New York City, in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. Amidst this exciting venture, I received a call from my doctor regarding the results of a recent biopsy. To my surprise, I was diagnosed with stage 0 DCIS Breast Cancer (Ductal Carcinoma In Situ), a type of cancer found within the milk ducts. This stage was unfamiliar to me, leaving me in a state of shock. Overwhelmed, I chose to keep this information to myself, not revealing it to any individuals I typically confide in. The experience felt incomprehensible. It was only when the doctor reached out two weeks later, reminding me to schedule an MRI for further diagnosis, that the magnitude of the situation sank in. For me, some of the most distressing aspects of being diagnosed with Breast Cancer are the multitude of unknown factors associated with it, including the extent of the mass, required treatments, and the possibility of recurrence. Having to share the news with my two children, ages 10 and 11, knowing I could not promise them that everything would be okay truly tugged at my heartstrings.

I underwent a bilateral mastectomy with direct implant reconstruction on April 11th, 2023, following a previous lumpectomy in January. Due to the density of my breasts, the lumpectomy results were inconclusive, and scans failed to accurately assess the extent of the mass—even the MRI showed no abnormalities. This led me to opt for a double mastectomy, during which both breasts and their tissue were removed. Thankfully, I was fortunate enough to preserve my nipples. I consider myself lucky to have had the option for a direct-to-implant procedure, which eliminated the need for expanders, and reconstruction was performed simultaneously with the



mastectomy. Throughout the recovery process, I learned that it is a gradual journey rather than a linear one. Initially, my range of motion was limited to simple front-to-back or side-to-side movements. Even tasks as basic as putting on a seatbelt proved challenging. However, as weeks passed, I gradually regained mobility and could reach for objects with increasing ease. This journey required time and support, and I am grateful to have had a wonderful team of doctors by my side.

Recovering from Breast Cancer is challenging with a combination of physical and mental hurdles. Losing physical strength, which was always important to me as an instructor, has been tough. The unknowns, worries, and self-doubt have taken a toll on my mental and emotional well-being. The multiple surgeries, scans, doctor visits, and sharing the news have all been physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. It's hard to pinpoint which struggle has been the greatest. On top of it all, I've had to navigate the added difficulty of grieving my Dad, who passed away a month after my surgery.

It's amazing how quickly I was able to start walking after my surgery, even at a painstakingly slow pace. But the real turning point in my healing journey came when my doctor cleared me to begin a Mastectomy-Rehabilitation program. This happened about three weeks after my operation, once the drains had been removed. It was a significant milestone for me.

Pilates, unlike other exercises, focuses on engaging the entire body and syncing movements with the breath. This is exactly what



sets Pilates apart from other exercises, even barre. Just five weeks after my surgery, I returned to Pilates on the mat. During rehab, there was a day when I asked for a ball or something to squeeze between my knees while doing an arm exercise. My body literally craved the essence of Pilates and its unifying force. This practice teaches us to learn and connect with our bodies, promoting overall well-being.

While the priorities can vary individually, emphasising proper breathing, maintaining consistency, and ensuring correct form during movements, stand out as key focuses for me. Understanding where you are in your recovery journey is also crucial.

It's hard to grasp the unexplainable unease with moving the body after breast cancer treatment or surgery. It's our role as instructors to help harness the power of their breath in navigating these motions. Everyone's abilities are distinct – what one client can accomplish, another might struggle with. Patience plays a vital role; invest time in comprehending where they are in their journey and the reasoning behind your teaching choices. Our empathy and expertise can create an immeasurable positive impact on someone's journey.

Shelly's pledge: helping those going through Breast Cancer

Frustrated by the lack of resources provided after surgery and once Rehabilitation ends, the "Warriors Guide Back to Movement" is a comprehensive resource tailored to guide you in safely enhancing your body's ability after completing physical therapy. It's not intended to replace that vital aspect. Instead, it merges



elements of physical therapy exercises with Pilates, and mental and emotional support, all while teaching you to harness your breath to safely transition back into your previous or modified fitness routine. This guide is a source of empowerment for us, the warriors, as we navigate our path toward movement and well-being.

I hold hope that I can provide assistance to the numerous women undergoing Breast Cancer Surgery Recovery, and even collaborate with studios dedicated to supporting women through these challenges.

Shelly Knight has a diverse background in teaching Pilates and Barre. She studied under Michele Larsson at Core Dynamics Pilates in Sante Fe, New Mexico in 2000. Soon after Shelly became barre certified by a studio that licensed the Lotte Berk Method. She assisted in starting other barre businesses in LA and Manhattan, New York as their Director of Training. Here, she developed new programs and classes with NY Socialites and celebrities. Shelly went on to create The Knight Technique, which combines her two favorite modalities, barre and Pilates, and will soon launch a Breast Cancer Surgery Warrior's Guide Back to Movement this fall.