

FIGHTING FOR HER

Life

After receiving a frightening diagnosis in 2018, Sharon Crowe has kept up her strength and spirits with Pilates.

By Sharon Crowe, as told to Beth Johnson

**WHEN I FIRST STARTED HAVING BACK PAIN IN LATE SUMMER 2017, I ASSUMED I HAD REINJURED A HERNIATED DISC THAT I HAD DEALT WITH A FEW YEARS PRIOR.**

Back then I had turned to Pilates to keep my core strong; that turned out to be a much better pain reliever than the drugs I had been prescribed.

Unfortunately, this time the pain kept getting worse and worse. After a couple of months, it had spread to my neck and pelvis; it became so bad that it hurt just to sit on the toilet. I couldn't go grocery shopping because I couldn't reach up or down to grab things off shelves. I cried riding in the car because every little

bump sent stabbing pains shooting through my entire body. Walking hurt, but standing hurt more. I couldn't lie down in bed to sleep. Actually, it was difficult going to sleep at all. Vacuuming, laundry... everything hurt, all the time. I had difficulty even carrying a purse!

**AN UNWANTED RETURN**

I had previously been treated for breast cancer in 2004, and then again in 2007, but after a decade in remission I'd come to consider it ancient history. At first, I didn't want to even think that my pain could be cancer-related. But after a variety of tests and scans, in January 2018 my doctor told me the news no one wants to hear: "You have Stage 4 metastatic breast

cancer. There is no cure, but there are treatments available." The cancer had spread to my spine, pelvis and ribs. My bones had become so brittle that I had multiple compression fractures. Envision a frozen lake with little cracks slowly spreading—that's what

my bones were like. No wonder I had been in so much pain!

Any cancer diagnosis is terrifying. To hear the words "no cure" is devastating. The very worst part of it for me, personally, was the guilt I felt seeing the sadness and fear in the eyes of

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHARON CROWE

my husband and our grown daughter and son. It was a very heavy burden.

My body needed to rest while I started on a treatment of medications, including Ibrance, a relatively new oral drug used to stop the spread of cancer

cells, and Letrozole, a hormone inhibitor. I also receive Zometa, an IV drug that strengthens my bones. Luckily, they started working for me.

**NEEDING PILATES AGAIN**

After following doctors' orders and resting for

a few weeks, I was anxious to get back to being active. Before my back pain started, I had been in great shape, as I'd been doing Pilates for five years, about a half hour from my home in Bradford, Ontario, Canada. My friend, Anita Connolly, is a STOTT

PILATES® Certified Instructor at the Uxbridge Pilates Studio located in Uxbridge, Ontario. I loved her classes so much that I referred to the studio as my happy place.

I loved the strength and energy Pilates gave me. And the better I

ABOVE: ANITA CONNOLLY, AN INSTRUCTOR AT UXBRIDGE PILATES CUES SHARON CROWE DURING SINGLE LEG STRETCH.





felt, the more motivated I got to challenge myself. A 30-second plank became a one-minute plank, then two. The night I did my first three-minute plank, I was pumped! It felt like such a huge accomplishment.

### DETERMINED TO START

So I knew I needed Pilates in my arsenal to fight against the disease that had taken over my body. When I brought it up to my doctor, he was hesitant until I assured him that I'd been doing it for years. Then he cautioned, "don't do it if it hurts." So I called Anita and told her that I wanted to come back and work out with her. That took some convincing—"Are you sure you're ready?"—before she agreed.

I'm sure I didn't look ready. I was so hunched over that I spent most of my time looking at the floor. I wasn't able to lie on a mat anymore. I couldn't stand for long periods of time. I couldn't even sit on a hard chair without pain.

### BACK TO THE STUDIO

But I was overwhelmed with gratitude my first time back at the studio. Anita had set up a comfy, padded chair for me and for an hour, I sat in it while she guided me through a complete workout that targeted my legs, arms, and most importantly, my core. I knew that I had to keep my core strong in order to take pressure off of my spine.

It felt great to sweat from exercise again! For the first time in a long time, I felt good, physically and mentally, and I knew that Pilates had to be part of my prescription for living with cancer. I didn't want to look like a lady with cancer in her spine, all bent over!

### GETTING STRONGER

I progressed from sitting on the padded chair to using a stability ball. After a few weeks, Anita began incorporating some barre time into my hour. My muscles had spent months rigidly clenched into tight little balls to deal with the pain, and now they were standing up and fighting back—at least that's the way I saw it. I could feel my range of motion and flexibility coming back.

As my muscles and bones grew stronger, I was able to start doing some regular things, like a short trip to the grocery store or vacuuming a room, which cheered me up. I hated having to be passive and putting so much on my wonderful husband.

### MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

At every Pilates session, Anita asked me a lot of questions and listened when I described how my body was feeling that day. She understood that I needed a sense of accomplishment to keep going and she was eager to figure out ways I could do Pilates without hurting myself.

*So I knew I needed **Pilates** in my arsenal to fight against the disease that had taken over my body. When I brought it up to my doctor, he was hesitant until I assured him that I'd been doing it for years.*

She modified exercises so that I was comfortable, while still ensuring I got the maximum workout. Simple things like putting a thin Pilates pad under my head or a mini stability ball under my pelvis while lying on the mat, made all the difference in the world.

### PUSHING THROUGH

It was tempting to use cancer as an excuse on days when I didn't want to push myself. The drugs I take cause nausea, headaches and fatigue. Some days it feels like I'm in a fog and everything seems like a huge exertion.

Still, I didn't want to make it easy for myself to back out of a class. I knew that if I could get myself to the Pilates studio, I'd feel so much better. Anita's studio is equipped with all kinds of bands, balls, rollers and other props. She has always been great at making a workout seem more like fun than work.

On the other hand, if I was in considerable pain, the session might simply be a lot of stretching. No matter what, after every Pilates class, I felt as if I'd won because I hadn't let cancer stop me.

### A MORE NORMAL LIFE

Since the diagnosis, I've tried to more

fully embrace life whenever possible. I have become more spontaneous with my husband, and we're spending a lot of time with our kids. I have no words for how great that has been and how lucky I am for their love and support.

By keeping my muscles strong, Pilates has allowed me to get back to my daily routines. Every time I walk my dog, carry a laundry basket up a flight of stairs, sit comfortably in a restaurant enjoying a meal with my husband, or pick up some groceries, I am thrilled with the normalcy of it all. I have Pilates to thank for that.

My oncologist has commented several times about how good I look, and how great my posture is considering my condition. The nurse who checks my blood pressure is always impressed with my muscle tone. So far, I'm lucky not to need a walker or a cane.

I still have to be careful, though. Even with the drugs I'm on to strengthen my bones, this past Christmas I ended up with compression fractures in five ribs. I don't even know how it happened! My bones are just that fragile. Anita is always working with me to keep my

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: CROWE WITH HER FAMILY—HUSBAND JAMIE, DAUGHTER LINDSAY AND SON RYAN; IN 2004, CROWE PARTICIPATED IN THE RUN FOR THE CURE WITH HER LONGTIME FRIENDS WHO CALL THEMSELVES THE GNO.

*Pilates gives me a way to regain some control and a sense of accomplishment when it feels as if everything is falling apart.*

TOP TO BOTTOM: CROWE KEEPING HER CORE STRONG WITH PLANK; AT PEBBLE BEACH, CA, IN 2018 SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER HER METASTATIC CANCER DIAGNOSIS; WALKING THE TRAILS AT THE HOME OF ANNE OF GREEN GABLES ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND IN 2018.

muscles strong in order to protect my bones, and to keep my core strong to protect my spine.

### MY NEW REALITY

I have been living with metastatic breast cancer for two years now. Cancer overwhelms your life—the endless appointments, the medications, the constant anxiety about its progression, the insomnia and crazy fatigue. Then there are the “big fears” that haunt you, such as, will I see my kids get married and have babies. Pilates gives me a way to regain some control and a sense of accomplishment when it feels as if everything is falling apart.

Currently, the cancer is not spreading. That is the best I can hope for, and I am always thrilled when my scans indicate “stable.” While the drugs are saving my life, Pilates is allowing me to live my life.

Pilates is the one thing that cancer can’t control. Even when I’m in pain or tired, there is still something I can accomplish in a Pilates class. And that makes me stronger than cancer and my body strong enough to live with cancer. Every time I leave a Pilates class sweaty and tired, I’m the winner. **PS**



# “The Best Job in the World”

Sharon Crowe’s Pilates teacher, Anita Connolly, talks about how she helped her client strengthen both her body and her emotional well-being.

**HER INITIAL REACTION TO WORKING WITH A CANCER PATIENT:** Sharon and I were friends before she was my client. So even though I had never worked with someone with cancer before, I knew I wanted to do everything I could to help her out. I had seen the difference Pilates had made in the lives of other clients, as well as myself, and I knew it would be a good thing for her.

**HER MAIN GOALS FOR SHARON:** I wanted to keep her comfortable and keep her moving. We know that movement is critical for a healthy body as well as a healthy mind. I wanted to make sure Sharon was feeling successful with her program every day. Cancer has a way of making people feel like they’ve lost control. I knew this would be a way for her to be in control of what she was doing, and the sense of accomplishment at performing an exercise well—even if it was a very modified exercise—would go a long way to help her self-image.

**MODIFYING HER WORKOUT:** I knew there would be some limitations, but I felt that I could find movements that would be appropriate. Much of my programming plan depended on Sharon’s state of health and mind on that particular day. I kept track of what we did each session so I could repeat the exercises that worked well and discard the ones that weren’t as effective. A lot of times it was a case of trial and error. We’d try out something new and if we got good results, we’d stick with it.

**TOY STORY:** When I teach, I often think of it as playing. Our studio is equipped with all kinds of

bands, balls, rollers and other props, so we’d just pick the “toy” we wanted to play with that day. Keeping a sense of playfulness in the workout made it seem more like fun than work. As she progressed, we started working on the larger equipment like the Reformer. Again, our main focus was to keep her moving her whole body, while still protecting the areas that were compromised.

**FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN MOTIVATION AND STAYING SAFE:** I think it is really important to keep communicating. It was easy to sense the days she needed more time to talk and the days she was able to push a little harder. The longer we worked together, the more I knew when to ask for a little more. Often it had to do with her medical appointments. When she got good test results back, she had a completely optimistic outlook; when the results were not as good, we had to move a little slower.

**HOW IT CHANGED HER AS AN INSTRUCTOR:** I’ve often said that I have the best job in the world. I feel thankful that I can have such a positive influence on my clients’ lives. It definitely motivates me to learn more and continue to grow as an instructor. If I can gain some additional knowledge that will help other clients improve their quality of life, I’m in. It makes me feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.

Anita Connolly is a STOTT PILATES® Certified Instructor who has been teaching since 2012. She received her certification at the Merrithew™ Corporate Training Center in Toronto. She recently became qualified in Total Barre®.



AT LEFT: CROWE AND CONNOLLY AT UXBRIDGE PILATES.