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Plaistow woman teaches fitness to cancer patients

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PLAISTOW — Vanessa Underwood was diagnosed with cancer eight years ago. She said fitness saved her life.

Now the Plaistow resident is helping other cancer patients work out with STEPS, Strength Training and Endurance Post Surgery, which helps cancer patients stay fit while they go through treatment.

"My goal is to get patients who are diagnosed with cancer or any life-threatening disease back to their pre-diagnosis fitness level," she said. "Exercise should be a part of their treatment."

She said training can help increase patient's strength, mobility, range of motion and help mitigate some of the side effects of treatments like chemotherapy.

Dr. Harvey Mamon, radiation oncology clinical director at Brigham & Women's and Dana Farber Cancer Institute, said Underwood's program can really help.

"There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that exercise can contribute to the prevention and control of cancer and other diseases," he said. "With specialized programming, STEPS can help cancer survivors reach their full recovery potential. Physicians should consider routinely recommending this type of program to their patients."

Underwood worked as a personal trainer for the past 22 years and was certified in cancer exercise by the Cancer Exercise Training Institute in 2005. She created the STEPS program a year and a half ago. She hopes to get it up and running with classes two times a week for 10 weeks.

"Right now, I have four clients with cancer," she said. "It's a revolving door and my hope is to get it into a clinic or hospital setting, like a doctor's office, and expand. I want it to become a support group and an exercise group, where people can encourage each other and learn from each other. I strongly feel cancer exercise programs should be covered by insurance."

Underwood said because she has survived anal cancer and two kidney transplants, she can understand the struggles and the side effects of cancer first-hand.

"I've been through it so people can relate to me," she said. "If I can do it, you can do it."

One of Underwood's clients is a woman who has breast cancer and is going through treatments.

"To work with her or any client, I have to know what type of cancer she has, and discuss treatment and risk factors," she said. "They also need a medical release from her doctor and may have to be X-rayed in case of potential fractures, because chemo can cause bone fractures. I also call doctors to learn about their condition."

She said she starts out slowly, with light weight training and works up to more. With athletes, they often have a hard time holding back from training.

"If you had a mastectomy, you can't go right back to lifting weights," she said. "You need someone to help train you and build you up."

Right now, this is a business for Underwood. She charges the same amount for cancer patients as she would for other personal training.

"I'd like to accept donations to cover my costs, so the client isn't paying anything at all," she said.

For more information about the STEPS program, visit underwoodsportsandfitness.com or call 382-7460.

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