

Cancer Survivor Wellness: Building Strength and Community through Exercise Training at Ramsey Student Center



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SUMMARY

In January 2018, the East Georgia Cancer Coalition began implementing an exercise program specialized for cancer survivors and their needs. As there are over 355,870 survivors in the state of Georgia, (cancer.org, 2014), an exercise program specifically for cancer survivors to help improve both their physical well-being and their overall quality of life could have an impact on a significant proportion of survivors.

CHALLENGE

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, after secondary malignancies, cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death among cancer survivors. The importance of exercise and maintenance of a healthy weight and a healthy cardiovascular system among cancer survivors cannot be overstated, due to survivors’ increased susceptibility to cardiac problems. Moreover, the likelihood of cancer recurrence significantly decreases when cancer survivors regularly exercise. ACSM says that physical activity can directly reduce the risk of endometrial cancer, prostate cancer, breast cancer, esophageal cancer, and kidney cancer.

SOLUTION

University of Georgia partnered with the East Georgia Cancer Coalition to implement a survivor wellness exercise program at Ramsey Recreation sports center for cancer survivors in the area. The exercise program takes place in Ramsey’s Functional training

room, which is an open space with rubber floor designed as a lifting platform, turf for tires, sleds and other agility/speed exercises, squat racks, monkey bars, hanging punching bags, and other various equipment like sand bags, Bulgarian bags, slam balls, kettlebells and much more.

The EGCC covers the costs of the survivors' class participation and membership access. While many cancer survivor exercise programs involve walking, gentle yoga, or other moderate-intensity activities, studies have shown profound effects on high intensity interval training and the profound benefits that high intensity interval training (HIIT) can have on cancer patients and survivors. At Ramsey, survivors participate in a variety of exercise that include high intensity work, with modifications and options for all the participant levels in the class. Exercising in the Functional Training Room (FTR) gives survivors confidence that they can safely push themselves to a high exercise capacity. Moreover, they gain newfound confidence in their ability to perform functional tasks. Having new and interesting workouts each time increases survivors' enjoyment and adherence to exercise.

RESULTS

To evaluate the physical and mental progress of survivors, certified cancer trainers administer, track, and evaluate physical biometrics. Survivors are also assessed on mental health impacts and overall wellness measured through elements such as sleep quality, self-confidence, memory, energy levels, and more.

While physical improvements are valuable to the survivor's health and longevity, the ECGG's main mission is to improve these survivors' day to day lives. Ischeel Botero, a cancer survivor and participant of the class, describes the results that she has felt by coming to the class. "This class makes me feel more motivated, stronger physically. I'm getting older, but at the same time, I'm feeling stronger." Ischeel also states the profound mental improvements that she has received by attending the class. "Mentally of course I feel more positive and happier. I'm feeling younger. Now I want to do so many things that I didn't do before."

Angel Padilla, assistant research scientist at University of Georgia and cancer wellness participant for over a year, explains how this class not only allows him to rediscover his body and his physical capabilities post-cancer, but it also allows him to escape from his busy days in the lab. "[Class] allows me to clear my mind from all the problems of the day, all the frustrations at work." While many people say they do not have time to exercise during their busy days, Angel explains how small group training classes give him the best excuse to leave his busy work life for an hour or two a day.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is the East Georgia Cancer Coalition's hope to expand the program throughout the east Georgia region, so that cancer survivors can experience similar benefits. "We are buying life, here" Ischeel says and Angel nods his head, agreeing. "Come and try it." He concludes. "You will be impressed."