

**L**ISA Tasker has a finely tuned sense of mood, one that alerts her to those nuances of behaviour which signal the psychological state of her clients.

A breast cancer rehabilitation therapist, she runs the city's only Pink Pilates program at a New Farm fitness studio, a place where women go following surgery to help regain their physical and mental strength.

A Kiwi who brought the program to Brisbane from New Zealand 18 months ago, she sees women cancer sufferers at their most vulnerable.

"Women come in and at first they're very careful about what they do but it's very gentle. Pilates is gentle exercise anyway and we do exercises that have been designed specifically for them.

"It's more specific to the shoulder, chest and back areas. Depending on the surgery, they could have lots of scarring, so strength and flexibility can be compromised and radiation can also stop a range of movement. The whole shoulder area can be lacking in strength," she explains, her voice echoing around her empty studio.

"In New Zealand, these classes are available throughout the country, the \$50 per session cost subsidised 80 per cent by a philanthropic trust. In Australia, the \$40 per session cost is at the expense of the patient." She hopes that one day a similar scheme might operate here.

A science graduate who has specialised in rehabilitation work, Tasker says she has been surprised by the number of younger women who are now taking the course.

"There's quite a few young women, mid to late 30s, and we're now looking to doing a class specifically for them," she says. "They're a little bit different to the older ladies.

"A lot of them have had more aggressive cancers. I'm not sure if that's the case across the board but it's been our experience here. They tend to have had more aggressive surgery and there's quite a number of them who have had both breasts off and had reconstructions.

"They tend to have a little more get up and go and want to get better faster when compared with older clients.

"Some of the older ladies have had previous diagnoses and had breast cancer 20 years ago and it's come back again and they're doing something more physical about it this time around.

"And the course is tailored to individual requirements. Some of them are still doing chemotherapy when they come here, some are three or four years down the track so everyone is at a different point."

Tasker says one of the benefits of Pink Pilates is that it allows women to realise they can exercise without hurting themselves.

"Psychologically it helps their self-esteem because they get their strength back and can do things again and it helps them with their energy levels, because they can get quite fatigued from their medication."

She says that she has become close to some of her clients and regrets not having been able to help them earlier.

"They're so lovely. I hear their stories and obviously I see them after their treatment but sometimes I think it would have been nice to have been able to support them while they were having their

# Healing power of exercise

Pink Pilates is helping women regain their strength after breast cancer



**Mike O'Connor**

## THE INTERVIEW

surgery, although some of them have gone on to have more surgery while I've known them."

Daily exposure to the disease has made Tasker conscious of the risks to which all women are exposed.

"I have regular screenings and I think it's important even if you are younger. Any suggestion to lift the age for free screenings is crazy. I see a lot of women coming through in their early to late forties so, if anything, they need to lower the age limit."

Her clients, she says, are remarkable for their positive attitude. "They've gone through the worst of the treatment and they're wanting to do something to get back to being fully functional. And I make sure I'm really positive when I'm around them, although sometimes I think they boost me up as much as I boost them, especially the younger ones.

"You have to tune in to how someone is feeling on the day because they might not tell you and a lot of the drugs put them into early menopause so you have that side of it, with their hormones being played with."

Some women she has met, she says, have been concerned about the threat posed to their siblings by the genetic links which cancer appears to follow.

"One lady was getting genetic testing done to see if there was anything in the family because she's got sisters, and there are others who've had aunts or mothers who've had breast cancer.

"A couple of the younger girls have been diagnosed with aggressive cancer on one side and they've opted to have both breasts off because the risk is so high of them getting it on the other side as well," Tasker says. "I sometimes wonder what I would do in that situation."

Her involvement with her clients has given her an insight into their private lives.

"It's not just the ladies going through it but their partners.

"Most of them have been really supportive, although one lady's partner wasn't, which surprised me because her partner was another female.

"Maybe she was angry or upset at what was going on but you don't know how you are going to react until you are in that situation yourself."

Many of her clients, she says, had been regular gym users before their diagnoses.

"Some of the girls have been really active before and I think they are the ones who get frustrated the most because they

**It allows women to realise they can exercise without hurting**

have had to take a break from their activity levels.

"But after they've done the Pink Pilates, they've increased their activity outside the program."

Tasker believes there is a large number of women who would benefit who are unaware of the existence of the classes.

"It's a matter of getting knowledge of the classes out there. As for the cost, there's an initial consultation and then 10 one-on-one sessions for around \$470, or about \$40 for one session. It's not break-the-bank stuff but it obviously depends on your situation. And I give them home programs as well, so if they're not able to continue after the 10 sessions, they have exercises they can do at home. It sets them up."

She says some Pink Pilates clients interact with regular gym users at the studio and are happy to talk about their surgery experiences. "That's their decision. Most of them don't want to keep it a secret. They want people to know about breast cancer, and anything that raises women's awareness and gets them to check themselves is a good thing."

I leave Tasker wondering why the Kiwis can run a trust which funds these courses for all women and we can't.

For more information about Pink Pilates, [www.pilates-studio.com.au](http://www.pilates-studio.com.au)  
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