

Young survivors of cancer often face challenges reintegrating into their schools and communities after treatment. Maintaining a physically active lifestyle is recommended, but finding appropriate exercises that cater to their needs can be difficult. As a result, the pilot fitness program Move4Fun/Move4Fitness was developed. This 12-week basic fitness program teaches young survivors of cancer appropriate exercises and how they can exercise on their own with limited space and equipment. Participants experienced physical and mental transformations demonstrated through weight loss, building of muscle, and increased self-confidence.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Low impact exercise and stretching can help maintain flexibility and balance during and after treatment.
- A workout buddy can help survivors stay consistent, as well as provide emotional support and motivation.
- Survivors should always consult their physician before beginning any exercise program.

#### KEYWORDS

adaptive fitness; physical activity; survivorship; exercise; bone health

#### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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# Survivor Fitness

## An exercise program for young survivors and patients with cancer

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Children, teenagers, and young adults who have survived courses of treatment for cancer or blood disorders often have issues rejoining their communities. Although the American Institute for Cancer Research (2008) recommends a physically active lifestyle, finding appropriate exercise alternatives that cater to their specific needs can be challenging. Often, children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer have been medically excused from participation in physical education at school. Some are placed on the sidelines in their gym classes and discouraged from participating by teachers who are not experienced in adaptive physical fitness. The Children's Oncology Group ([COG], 2016) states that many factors influence a survivor's ability to be physically active; however, childhood cancer and treatment should not be barriers to staying physically active. To address this need, a pilot fitness program, Move4Fun/Move4Fitness (M4F/M4F), was developed at an urban cancer center in New York.

### Move4Fun/Move4Fitness Purpose

M4F/M4F was created to meet the physical activity needs of teenagers and young adults with cancer and survivors of cancer. The author developed this program while working as a recreation therapist and wellness program coordinator in pediatric oncology. During the monthly teen and young adult support groups, several of the participants requested exercise tips. Many

of them had had fitness club memberships but did not find going to the gym enjoyable for various reasons. The primary barrier to participation among participants revolved around poor body image and self-esteem. Many adults find it difficult to join a health club and see the results they want without additional guidance. The high-tech equipment and fit people at the gym can be daunting to anyone. These teens and young adults also have body-image issues related to visible surgical scars, prosthetic limbs, bald patches of skin that may never regrow hair, and weight gain from medication, all which may discourage them from exercising in such an environment.

In addition, the patients and survivors who participate in this program are inner-city teenagers going through chemotherapy in an age when cyberbullying is the norm. One young woman from Pakistan named J.H. not only had to adapt to the hip-hop-based teenage culture in New York City but to a society in which women were allowed to pursue higher education and seek their own purpose in life. J.H. had to learn how to adapt to life without hair and eyebrows and a leg that was an inch shorter than the other because of a hip surgery to remove a tumor.

What these young adults needed was a program tailor-made for each of their abilities or limitations and, most importantly, some activities they were able to do together, because they understood one another's needs so well. They became one another's own support system, not just physically through exercise but socially and emotionally through an enhanced sense of self.