



Rachel Ezekiel-Fishbein strikes a pose in a Pilates class at the Aquatic & Fitness Center in Jenkintown. Three years ago, Ezekiel-Fishbein knew she needed antidepressant medication — and also plunged actively into a varied movement regimen.

Exercise, the great mood lifter

It was a potent, life-altering weapon in her battle to conquer postpartum depression.

Three years ago this month, Rachel Ezekiel-Fishbein was mired in emotional quicksand, sinking fast and deep. "I was sleepless and teary," she recalls. "Something wasn't right."

For months, she had sensed herself becoming more and more anxious. The previous August, she'd experienced a surge of joy with the birth of her third child and first daughter, Emma. But now that bliss had yielded to intensifying worry and gloom.

Outwardly, Rachel maintained the facade that friends and colleagues so admired and adored: upbeat, animated, exuberant. But inside, she was feeling increasingly fragile and desperate. Besides battling an old foe, anxiety, she was now marshaling her dwindling psychic reserves against a new enemy, melancholy.

Postpartum depression was the clinical explanation, a diagnosis Rachel initially resisted. How could she be "depressed," she who seemingly had it all: a happy marriage to a successful lawyer, a thriving public relations business, three lovely children, a host of loyal friends and loving relatives, a spacious house on a leafy street in Elkins Park?

Moreover, she came from tough stock. Her parents were "crunchy granola social activists" who considered it an indulgence to dwell on personal troubles when there were so many worthy causes to champion, so many important problems to solve. Her mother, Ruth, was a model of resilience, a woman who had escaped both the Nazis and breast cancer.

Rachel knew herself well enough to realize she needed a boost. It came in the form of antidepressant medication.

"Within a week, I felt so much better," Rachel remembers. But medication was only one tool. The very day she began taking it, she also went to a spinning class, and pushed herself hard. She began taking a daily brisk walk and going to twice-weekly yoga classes.

"I may have been anxious and depressed but I was determined to go to the gym," Rachel says. "I wanted my kids to see a mom who is strong. I was not going to sit around waiting for the medication to be a magic bullet."

Walking, spinning and yoga were the foundation of her fitness regimen. To that she added swimming in the summer

(working up to 36 laps in an Olympic-size pool) and eventually Pilates. She began with mat classes. Then, impressed by the results, she treated herself to weekly one-on-one sessions with instructor Bernadette Giorgi, who incorporates elements of ballet.

"It has made me stronger, improved my sense of balance and given me grace," says Rachel, who marvels at her newfound ability to "translate intention into motion."

Pilates has also transformed the look and shape of her body. "My midsection has lengthened, lifting my chest. My shoulders, arms and back are strong and lean. My core is more solid, and weight has disappeared everywhere." Her dress size has dropped from 10 to 6.

Endowed with an ample bust, Rachel was teased and harassed constantly in her teens and 20s. She also endured frequent headaches and a chronically sore neck and back. Finding clothes that fit was a challenge. So self-conscious was she about her chest that she was planning, after weaning Emma, to undergo breast-reduction surgery.

That's no longer necessary. "My proportions have changed, and I carry myself with more confidence," Rachel says. "My breasts are no longer the focal point. My slim waist is. I no longer hide my body in baggy clothing."

Now 41, Rachel still takes medication. It is not, she emphasizes, "a happy pill." It's medicine that merely "lets you be you." Along the way, she has come to "an understanding of transience." She knows now that just because she feels crummy at this moment doesn't mean she'll feel that way in an hour, or a day or week from now. Nothing lasts forever, ever low moods.

She has also gained a deeper appreciation for another potent tool, an agent of euphoria available to all: exercise.

"You do have the power to feel better and to change what you'd like to change," Rachel says. "It's the most amazing feeling — to be proud of your body."

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