

# Evaluation & Learning Health Innovation South West

Gentle Recovery: Learnings from Torbay  
and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust

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# 1. Summary

## 1.1. Context

- There are around 56,800 new cases of breast cancer in women every year in the UK (2017-2019) (1), and this is predicted to rise to around 69,900 by 2038-2040 (2).
- Undertaking regular moderate exercise (defined as 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week (3)) has been shown to reduce the risk of breast cancer recurrence by 55% and mortality by 68% among breast cancer patients at two-year follow-up (4).
- Maintaining a healthy weight is especially vital for those with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer, as excess fat contributes to increased oestrogen production, which can fuel the growth of hormone-sensitive cancers (5). Exercise helps by building muscle and counteracting muscle loss caused by aging, chemotherapy, or menopause, and burning fat.
- Targeted exercise can also reduce physical side effects of treatment, such as tightness and mobility issues from surgery and radiation (6), as well as common treatment-related symptoms like fatigue, nausea, poor circulation, and constipation (7).
- Beyond physical benefits, exercise and mind-body practices like yoga can improve mental health, reduce anxiety and depression, and enhance sleep quality during cancer recovery (8,9,10).

## 1.2. Gentle Recovery

Designed by a physiotherapist, scar tissue therapist, cancer yoga teacher, and cancer exercise specialist, Gentle Recovery is an online 12-module programme of yoga-based, oncology-informed exercise and wellbeing support for individuals who have had breast cancer.

The programme aims to:

- Remove the barriers to attending in-person classes that some individuals face.
- Embed the habit of attending to physical and emotional well-being on an ongoing daily basis through treatment recovery and beyond.
- Improve physical and mental health outcomes, and – longer-term – cancer recurrence rates.

## 1.3. Evaluation

Health Innovation South West worked in collaboration with Gentle Recovery and clinicians from Torbay Hospital's Breast Care Unit to learn how Gentle Recovery can best support individuals who have had breast cancer to recover physically and psychologically. The collaboration also sought to understand the impact that Gentle Recovery has on these individuals, and support further development of the programme.

To address the evaluation questions, a mixed-methods design was implemented between October 2024 and February 2025. Data was gathered from the following sources:

- Depth interviews with Gentle Recovery users (n=10)
- Cross-sectional bespoke survey of Gentle Recovery users (n=12)
- Longitudinal (pre- and post-programme use) assessment of change in quality of life using IL226 EORTC (European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer) survey with Gentle Recovery users (pre-programme n=47; post-programme n=19).

## 1.4. Results

### 1.4.1 Recruitment

Gentle Recovery has 29 active users, and 28 users who have finished the programme.

The vast majority of users contributing to this evaluation had received funded places via Torbay Hospital. Some of these users had seen Gentle Recovery publicity at the Breast Care Unit where they were receiving treatment, and all had received a recommendation to try the Gentle Recovery programme by a clinician. One individual who had self-funded their place had found out about Gentle Recovery online.

Factors behind signing up for Gentle Recovery included:

- Recommendation from a member of the Unit's clinical team engendering trust in the programme.
- Advice from clinicians of the role of exercise in reducing the risk of cancer recurrence, with Gentle Recovery offering a way of doing this safely.
- Feeling confident to use the programme as it was specifically tailored for people recovering from breast cancer treatment.
- The opportunity to be supported to take back control of their health.
- The holistic nature of the programme
- The online nature of the programme.

### 1.4.2. Experience of the programme

All but one of the Gentle Recovery users surveyed cited the yoga classes as among the most valuable elements of the programme in supporting their recovery. Other elements frequently cited were stress reduction techniques (7 out of 12) and lymphatic drainage exercises (6 out of 12).

Characteristics of Gentle Recovery that were highlighted as particularly valued by users included:

- Emotional support and feeling less alone in dealing with the impact of treatment. This was particularly valuable for some as they stepped away from the intensive medical care for their condition.
- The holistic nature of the Gentle Recovery programme, providing an all-round programme of care.
- The opportunity to create daily focus and routine during treatment and recovery, particularly important when 'normal' routines had been disrupted.
- Providing a 'bridge back to normality', enabling users to feel they were helping themselves move towards recovery and normal life.

#### *Barriers to using Gentle Recovery*

All survey respondents cited at least one barrier which had prevented them using Gentle Recovery as much as they would have liked, with the most frequently ones being time (7 out of 12) and motivation (5 out of 12).

### 1.4.3. Impact of the programme

#### *Physical health*

Use of the Gentle Recovery programme was associated with a small overall improvement in quality of life scores (measured using the EORTC short-form survey).

The vast majority of Gentle Recovery users surveyed thought their motivation to make positive shifts in their life had improved as a result of using the programme.

All participants surveyed felt that Gentle Recovery had a positive impact on their physical fitness. Similarly, almost all felt that the programme had had a positive impact on physical flexibility.

There is evidence that Gentle Recovery was influential in moving some people towards undertaking the recommended NHS levels of regular exercise, who were not previously doing regular levels of exercise at this level.

Reasons behind these changes include:

- Imparting an understanding of individuals' bodies - including temporary or permanent limitations – and how to adapt exercise to make it accessible.
- The progressive nature of the programme.
- Teaching people a variety of tools to keep physically active.
- Empowering people to feel they can play a part in their recovery, including knowledge of the role of exercise in reducing risk of cancer recurrence.
- Encouraging a mindset shift toward embracing movement/exercise as part of daily life.

Management of treatment side-effects also showed promising results, with the majority of users surveyed reporting improved knowledge of how to manage lymphoedema and scar tissue. Results were more mixed for impact on nutrition and sleep hygiene, with around half reporting no change for nutrition and a third no change for sleep hygiene.

### *Mental health*

Mental health impacts attributed by participants to use of the programme tell a similar story, with the majority of those surveyed reporting that Gentle Recovery had a positive impact on:

- Levels of stress and anxiety,
- Levels of low mood/depression,
- Longer-term perspective and/or the way they live.

Participants who experienced benefits to their mental health from Gentle Recovery described how helpful the stress reduction tools, such as breathing techniques, were to help them combat the mental stress and worry associated with their medical diagnosis.

Value was also attached to the broader mental health education in the Gentle Recovery programme – specifically gaining knowledge of interaction of the stress reduction breathing techniques with levels of stress hormones and mental health.

Results show the impact of Gentle Recovery on body image and self-confidence were more mixed, with around half of users reporting the programme had no effect on these areas. One potential reason for this is that these are more distal intended programme outcomes, and less directly targeted by the Gentle Recovery activities.

Results were also mixed for the impact of the programme on feelings of social connectedness, with just under half reporting no effect. However, qualitative results also show that, for some users, the social aspects of Gentle Recovery are really valued. Reasons outlined for this included:

- The chance to connect with others who had been through similar challenges.
- Feeling able to open up and get peer support, in the knowledge that they would be understood.

- The opportunity to share learning with, and learn from, others regarding how to cope with treatment.
- Gaining encouragement from hearing stories of physical recovery.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Overall, evaluation evidence shows that Gentle Recovery has had a significant positive impact for many of its users, with evidence showing short- and long-term benefits across both physical and mental well-being. Crucially, it has highlighted that Gentle Recovery addresses an otherwise unmet need for patients dealing with cancer treatment, by offering a supported and holistic route back to physical, psychological and emotional recovery.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Context

There are around 56,800 new cases of breast cancer in women every year in the UK (2017-2019): over 150 cases every day (1). Rates of breast cancer in women in the UK increased by 24% between 1993 and 2018, and are predicted to rise to around 69,900 new cases of breast cancer every year in the UK by 2038-2040 (2).

There is a growing evidence base that undertaking regular moderate exercise (defined as 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week (3)) reduces the risk of breast cancer recurrence and mortality among breast cancer patients. A recent study found that **undertaking regular moderate exercise before and one year after breast cancer treatment reduced risk of recurrence by 55% and mortality by 68% at two-year follow up (4).**

**Maintaining a healthy weight** is particularly important for women with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. Excess fat contributes to increased oestrogen production, which can fuel the growth of hormone-sensitive cancers, and increase risk of breast cancer recurrence (5). Exercise helps by building muscle and counteracting muscle loss caused by aging, chemotherapy, or menopause, and burning fat, thus helping to maintain a healthier body composition.

The surgery and radiation that form part of breast cancer treatment options can cause **subsequent tightness and movement restriction**, which can be significantly mitigated via targeted exercise and stretching (6).

Exercise has been shown (7) to **alleviate several common side effects of cancer treatments**, including chemotherapy-induced nausea, fatigue from radiation and chemotherapy, blood circulation issues, constipation relief and improved sexual health. These benefits are not only physical but also play a crucial role in improving a person's quality of life during recovery.

A cancer diagnosis can lead to anxiety, depression, and stress. However, there is evidence that **exercise (8), and mind-body exercises (e.g. yoga) (9), significantly improve mental health** outcomes. Additionally, there is a significant body of evidence demonstrating the **benefits of exercise on sleep quality (10)** – an area which can be challenged when dealing with the mental load of a cancer diagnosis.

### 2.2. Gentle Recovery

Designed by a physiotherapist who has experience as a scar tissue therapist, cancer yoga teacher, and cancer exercise specialist, Gentle Recovery is an online 12-module programme of yoga-based, oncology-informed exercise and wellbeing support for individuals who have had breast cancer.

The programme aims to:

- **Remove the barriers to attending in-person classes** that some individuals face.
- **Embed the habit of attending to physical and emotional wellbeing on an ongoing daily basis** through treatment recovery and beyond.
- **Improve physical and mental health outcomes**, and – longer-term – cancer recurrence rates.

Specifically, Gentle Recovery comprises:

- Daily yoga-based oncology exercise sessions, designed to increase exercise levels, and build strength and mobility in an accessible, progressive manner.
- A daily walking programme
- Lymph drainage exercises
- Educational modules on wellbeing areas such as nutrition, sleep and menopause symptoms.
- Audio-relaxation exercises
- Reflection exercises
- Access to the 'Community Tree' online community hub.
- Online Q&A space moderated by Gentle Recovery facilitator.
- Bi-monthly live Q&A/topic-based advice from Gentle Recovery facilitator.

### 2.2.3. Gentle Recovery funding

In 2024, Gentle Recovery Ltd. was offered charitable funding from Torbay Breast Care Unit Charitable Funds for 23 Gentle Recovery places for breast cancer patients of the Breast Care Unit at Torbay Hospital. These individuals received a subsidised place (£194 subsidy; £35 self-funded). Users not receiving a charity-funded place pay £229 for 12 months' access to the Gentle Recovery programme.

Gentle Recovery Ltd. was also successful in winning a place on the Cancer Innovation Challenge run by Health Innovation South West in 2024, testing high-potential innovations for cancer patients across the South West. This report comprises findings from the evaluation.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 The Evaluation

Health Innovation South West worked in collaboration with Gentle Recovery and clinicians from Torbay Hospital's Breast Care Unit to learn how Gentle Recovery can best support individuals who have had breast cancer to recover physically and psychologically, understand the impact that Gentle Recovery has on these individuals, and support further development of the programme.

The evaluation focuses on answering the following questions:

1. Who is using Gentle Recovery?
  - i. How did users hear of Gentle Recovery? What made them want to join the programme?
  - ii. What - if any - barriers do Gentle Recovery users face to attending in-person yoga and wellbeing support?
2. How are patients using the programme to support their recovery?
  - i. Do patients experience any barriers to using the programme?
3. What impact has Gentle Recovery had on users' levels of knowledge, confidence and motivation to make changes to improve physical and mental health?
4. What short- and long-term changes have users made to improve physical and mental health as a result of using Gentle Recovery?
5. What has been the impact on participants' wellbeing? Did Gentle Recovery influence participants' longer-term perspective?

### 3.2. Methods

To address the evaluation questions, a mixed-methods design was implemented between October 2024 and February 2025. Data was gathered from the following sources:

- Depth interviews with Gentle Recovery users (n=10)
- Cross-sectional bespoke survey of Gentle Recovery users (n=12)
- Longitudinal (pre- and post-programme use) assessment of change in quality of life using IL226 EORTC (European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer) survey with Gentle Recovery users (pre-programme n=47; post-programme n=19).

Interviews were transcribed using an automated transcription service and edited by the research team. Thematic analysis was employed across both interview transcripts and survey open text questions. Emergent themes are discussed within the text. All quotes used in the text are from Gentle Recovery users.

Descriptive statistics from the survey data are presented in the text.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Reach and recruitment

#### 4.1.1. Who is using Gentle Recovery?



**Gentle Recovery has 29 active users, and 28 users who have finished the programme.**

All survey respondents (n=12) were female and of White British ethnicity. A quarter (n=3) were aged 41-50, nearly half (n=5) were 51-60, and four were 61-70. All respondents were currently using Gentle Recovery at the time of completing the survey. A quarter (n=3) started using Gentle Recovery while having active treatment (i.e. chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy) and the remaining three-quarters (n=9) after completing active treatment.

#### 4.1.2. How did users hear of Gentle Recovery? What made them want to join the programme?

**The vast majority of users contributing to this evaluation had received funded places via Torbay Hospital.** Some of these users had seen Gentle Recovery publicity (posters) at the Breast Care Unit where they were receiving treatment, and all had received a recommendation to try the Gentle Recovery programme from either a specialist nurse or consultant at the Breast Care Unit. There was one individual who had self-funded their place, who had found out about Gentle Recovery online.

**Recommendation from a member of the Unit's clinical team** was a key factor behind trying the Gentle Recovery programme for some users, who felt they could then trust the programme:

*"It seemed to me a good idea to take advice from a medical professional in that way."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 1]

Linked to this was being advised by clinicians of the factors behind reducing the risk of cancer recurrence – with **Gentle Recovery being an opportunity to safely increase physical exercise (a key factor in reducing risk) post-treatment.**

Many users reported feeling anxious about taking the first steps towards exercise after cancer treatment – for these individuals the fact that Gentle Recovery was specifically tailored for people recovering from breast cancer treatment and was designed to be accessible by a physiotherapist who had worked with people in this situation meant that they **felt safe to try the programme.**

*"So I was back at rock bottom again, facing this mountain to climb, and feeling very defeated, I think is the word and the very first session I did of India's program is literally just module one, lying down, doing pelvic floor exercises. And it was like a revelation to me that it is possible to go gently and to take it slowly, just within your capabilities."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6]

Some also highlighted that a key draw of this programme was the chance to be **supported to take control back of their health**, in a way that was decided by them, after having to be a more passive recipient of medical treatment for some time.

*"So I felt like there was a strength behind [the GR programme] to kind of go alongside me. I didn't feel like that it was in the driving seat.... I felt like I was alongside. I was in the driving seat, but this was just a massive support."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 9]

Another attraction of Gentle Recovery for some was its **holistic nature**. These individuals were interested in **finding support to recover not just physically, but also psychologically**, from the experience of being diagnosed and treated for cancer. *"What India was offering was much more holistic and much more looking at all the aspects of recovery, psychological, spiritual and physical, which was what I was looking for."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6] Another user described her *"nervous system being on fire [after diagnosis and treatment]"* and needing *"help to put out the flames a bit."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

The **online nature of the programme was an essential factor enabling participation for some users**, and 10 out of 12 survey respondents reported this as a positive for them. Some users really **valued the associated convenience**, which meant they could fit the Gentle Recovery classes and practices easily into their daily lives, at a time that suited them. For others, this was because it was essential that they **kept the nature of their diagnosis private**, which precluded attendance at any cancer-specific in-person classes. For others, the reasons were practical – **specialist classes were too far away for those that lived in very rural areas**, or for those with many commitments, who were time-poor. The fourth group were those whose **health precluded class attendance** – the availability of an online programme meant they could do what they were able to within the safety and privacy of their own home. A further reason for some was **a reluctance to be around others with cancer**, as they felt this impeded them moving on from the experience.

**No one that participated in the evaluation survey found the online nature of the programme to be a negative, but some in both the qualitative and quantitative strands were ambivalent**, with two out of 12 of survey respondents being 'neither positive or negative'. Reasons for ambivalence were difficulties with motivation to get classes done at home, the lack of a suitable practice space at home, and a desire for the company that in-person classes provided.

### 4.1.3. Barriers to attending in-person yoga classes

Respondents to the evaluation survey who had not attended in-person yoga classes (4 out of 12) were asked whether there were any barriers which prevented them from choosing this option. Barriers cited included financial (1), travel time (1), a preference for practicing yoga at home (1) and lack of awareness of where to attend in-person classes (1) (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Barriers to attending in-person yoga classes amongst Gentle Recovery users**

<b>Financial (cost of class for non-hospital class attendance)</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Financial (needed to work limiting time to attend fixed-time classes)</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Travel distance/time to in-person class</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Confidence (felt uncomfortable exercising in a group setting)</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Other: preference for practising yoga at home; lack of awareness of in-person classes available.</b>	<b>2</b>

Base: Gentle Recovery users who did not attend in-person yoga classes (n=4).

## 4.2. Experience

### 4.2.1. How are patients using the programme to support their recovery?



Patients used the Gentle Recovery programme to support their recovery by engaging with its most valued elements—especially yoga classes, stress reduction techniques, and lymphatic drainage exercises—while also benefiting from emotional support, daily structure, and a flexible, holistic approach that helped them regain a sense of agency and normality during and after cancer treatment.

All but one of the Gentle Recovery users surveyed cited the yoga classes as among the most valuable elements of the programme in supporting their recovery (see Table 2). Other elements frequently cited were stress reduction techniques (7 out of 12) and lymphatic drainage exercises (6 out of 12).

**Table 2: Elements of the Gentle Recovery programme cited by users as most valuable (multiple response)**

Yoga classes (i.e. recorded videos)	11
Stress reduction techniques (Relaxation exercises, meditation, breathwork)	7
Lymphatic drainage exercises	6
Online group - Q&A and topic-based virtual sessions	5
Walking programme	4
Educational elements (e.g. nutrition, sleep, managing treatment side effects or menopause symptoms)	3
The Community Tree	2
Other: Being able to talk with others experiencing the same illness	1

Base: Gentle Recovery users (n=12). Source: evaluation survey.

The **emotional support** that participants experienced from the programme was a further aspect of Gentle Recovery that was cited as particularly valued by some. This support helped patients cope with the physical and emotional impact of the treatment and helped them *“to feel less alone in dealing with treatment side effects.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Survey Respondent 1]

*“What I was looking for was something a bit more supportive. And that’s, I think, what India’s interaction with her participants gives you, because she is very supportive and a very kind person.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]

Some participants who were finishing treatment for their cancer felt that this support from Gentle Recovery was particularly **valuable as they stepped away from the intensive medical care for their condition:**

*“[Gentle Recovery] is structured, and there’s somebody reaching out to you, as opposed to you having to reach out to them. And I think that that’s hugely helpful, as breast cancer ceases to be the total focus of your life, and kind of recovery and keeping well becomes the next focus. And there’s still that link back to breast cancer, and there’s still that link back to people who understand how scary it is.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 3]

Users also responded to the **holistic nature** of the Gentle Recovery programme, providing an “all-round programme of care” [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 1], which meant that participants could shape their own programme to suit what they needed energetically, physically or emotionally at any particular time. For some, this helped to give them a feeling of agency back – which was important in a situation in which they felt “*totally out of control*” [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 1].

*“Going outside, engaging with walking, the meditation, the breathing, yeah, it’s all the different aspects to it that just gives that sort of much more of a complete jigsaw. And you can pick out the jigsaw pieces you want when you need something different from the programme.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2].

For some who were unable to work while undergoing active treatment, the programme offered an **important focus and routine** - “*get up, yoga, shower, breakfast*” [Gentle Recovery User, Survey Respondent 5] - while the structure of work was not available, which helped them get back to a feeling of ‘normality’.

*“It gave me a focus every day, because I was off work. Everybody was out at work. It’s easy to sit and do nothing. ... Just do 10 minutes of yoga, you know, I would give myself to do in the morning, and therefore it gave my day a bit more routine. And therefore I got back to normal a bit quicker because of that idea of doing a little.... I think that helps you make the transition back to work.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 5]

This idea of the programme providing a **bridge back to normality** was echoed by other participants. One described using techniques such as breathing and gentle movement within the constraints of physical recovery from surgery, enabling her to “*think, feel I was doing something, and it was doing me some good. And also, I suppose it spoke of, there’ll be a time when I would get better. Sometimes, when you’re struggling with something, you can’t imagine the time ... can’t imagine the time when you’re going to be better*” [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6].

Users also appreciated the **accessibility and adaptability** of the yoga sessions:

*“You kind of came away feeling uplifted, not ‘Oh god, I haven’t been able to do that’. So, for example, certain yoga moves were completely impossible for me to do, you know, I just found them so difficult. But always within the programme [India] kind of was about, you know... you haven’t got to be able to achieve, sort of standing on one leg and doing the ‘tree’ [yoga pose] without falling over. And there was always a very positive spin on if you needed to do it in a more relaxed way, or from a sat down position kind of thing”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2].

Survey respondents who used Gentle Recovery **during active treatment** were asked how they used the programme to help them through the treatment period. **Many of the same themes that are outlined above were described by this group**, including using the programme to gain back a sense of agency, appreciating the emotional support at a time of extreme anxiety, and the structure that the programme offered to daily life. One user who had only started the programme after active treatment had finished said they would have liked to use it during treatment had it been available:

*“...mental health is, is really sort of challenged in that phase, and anything that helps kind of calm and give you something that makes you feel like you’re kind of relaxing and taking your mind off things, or just, you know...you don’t have to move to benefit from yoga.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6].

## 4.2.2. Do patients experience any barriers to using the programme?

Survey respondents were asked whether anything had prevented them using Gentle Recovery as much as they would have liked. All respondents cited at least one barrier, with the most frequently ones being **time** (7 out of 12) and **motivation** (5 out of 12) (see Table 3). One of the respondents who cited time as barrier also noted that they thought it was very good for them to slow down and practice yoga, but as they were so used to a very busy life they struggled to make time for it. One of the difficulties detailed by a respondent who had **difficulty navigating the programme online** was that the videos did not always register as complete, meaning they couldn't move on with the modules.

**Table 3: Barriers preventing participants using Gentle Recovery as much as they would have liked (multiple response)**

Time	7
Motivation	5
State of health	2
Content not being as expected	0
Too much information/overwhelm	0
Online nature of programme	1
Difficulty navigating the programme online	2
Other – general illnesses; holidays; harder to motivate post-completion to re-do yoga videos	2

Base: Gentle Recovery users (n=12).

Survey respondents were also asked about **barriers to using the Community Tree and/or the online group Q&A sessions**. The **majority (10 out of 12) said nothing had prevented them** using these elements of the programme. Those who had outlined two reasons. One was a **feeling of insufficient interaction on the Community Tree**, possibly as there was *“a huge sense of not wanting to say the wrong thing - as you don't know everyone's circumstances”* [GR participant 6]. They felt there was more connection in the Q&A sessions, but as different people attended different sessions, it was challenging to establish a sense of community. A second obstacle to participation was expressed by someone who was struggling with their health and found it **upsetting hearing from others how active they were being** – which resulted in them withdrawing. Finally, one participant mentioned being unaware that the online group session they attended was practical, so felt unprepared.

## 4.3. Impact



**Use of the Gentle Recovery programme was associated with a small overall improvement in quality of life scores and increased motivation for positive lifestyle changes among most participants.**

Change in quality of life before and after using Gentle Recovery was assessed using a short-form version of the EORTC (European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer) survey (IL226). The survey asks respondents to rate the level to which the listed symptoms or problems have been experienced over the last week, between a score of 1: 'not at all' to 4: 'very much'. A *decrease* in score over time therefore represents an *improvement* for patients.

Use of the Gentle Recovery programme was associated with a small overall improvement in quality of life scores: results (see Table 3) show an overall difference in score of -2.5 in the assessment of symptoms between patients who were about to start using Gentle Recovery (n=47) and those who had completed the 12-module programme (n=19).

**Table 4: Assessment of change in quality of life for patients pre- and post-Gentle Recovery use.**

<b>COMBINED SAMPLE EORTC IL226 Question</b>	<b>Average score before</b>	<b>Average score after</b>	<b>Average score change</b>
During the past week:			
Have you worried about your health? <sup>1</sup>	2.53	2.22	-0.31
Have you felt less physically attractive as a result of your disease or treatment?	2.69	2.39	-0.30
Have you been dissatisfied with your body?	2.75	2.17	-0.57
Have you worried about your health in the future?	2.94	3.00	0.06
Have you had pain in your arm(s) or shoulder(s)?	2.15	2.22	0.06
Have you had problems raising your arm or moving it sideways?	1.89	2.04	0.15
Have you had pain in the area of your affected breast?	2.40	2.26	-0.14
Has the area of the affected breast been swollen?	1.85	1.70	-0.15
Have you had problems with your joints? <sup>1</sup>	2.55	2.44	-0.11
Have you had stiffness in your joints?	2.68	2.39	-0.29
Have you had pain in your joints?	2.44	2.17	-0.27
Have you had aches or pains in your muscles?	2.18	1.87	-0.30
Has weight gain been a problem for you? <sup>1</sup>	1.94	1.56	-0.38
<b>Average score per symptom*</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>-0.2</b>
<b>Average score across all IL226 symptoms *</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>-2.5</b>

Base: Pre-Gentle Recovery use n=47. Post Gentle Recovery use n=19.

<sup>1</sup> No pilot data available; \* Rounded to 1 decimal place.

Source: Short-form IL226 EORTC (European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer) survey.

The minimally important difference (MID) for the full 30 item EORTC QLQ C30, is typically defined as the smallest score change that patients perceive as meaningful or clinically relevant. For the EORTC QLQ-C30, this is generally considered to be a change of 5 to 10 points on the scale. The short form IL226 EORTC used in this evaluation has 13 items. While it is reasonable to assume that the MID would be smaller for this scale and that 2.5 would fall into the lower end of this meaningful difference, there is no evidence to suggest what a MID would look like for the short form so we are unable to state whether this change is clinically significant.

Overall, the **majority of survey respondents said they thought their motivation to make positive shifts in their life had changed either ‘a little’ (6 out of 12), or ‘a lot’ (4 out of 12) as a result of using Gentle Recovery.** Only 2 out of 12 thought there had been no change in their motivation level.

### 4.3.1. Physical health



**Gentle Recovery improved users’ confidence and knowledge in managing lymphoedema, scar tissue, and physical side effects; supported increased physical activity and flexibility; fostered mindset shifts toward sustainable recovery; and offered accessible tools that empowered users to actively participate in their healing journey.**

#### **Managing lymphoedema**

Nearly half of survey respondents (5 out of 12) felt that their knowledge and confidence in how to manage lymphoedema had improved a lot as a result of using the Gentle Recovery programme, with a further three feeling it had improved a little. Two people felt there had been no change.<sup>1</sup> Three out of 12 felt this improved knowledge and confidence translated into Gentle Recovery having a large positive impact on their ability to manage lymphoedema, with five reporting a little positive impact, and two no impact<sup>2</sup>.

*“What I have taken from [Gentle Recovery] is the lymphatic drainage exercises, which India recommended for anybody who’d had lymph nodes removed. And so I do those. I do those every day, every single day, and that takes about 10 to 15 minutes.” [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2].*

#### **Knowledge of how to manage scar tissue**

Nearly half of survey respondents (5 out of 12) felt that their knowledge and confidence in how to manage and stretch scar tissue had improved a lot as a result of using the Gentle Recovery programme, with a further six feeling it had improved a little. One person felt there had been no change. Similar proportions felt that their knowledge and confidence in how to manage other physical side-effects of treatment (e.g. joint pain, menopausal symptoms) had improved a lot (6 out of 12) or a little (4 out of 12). Two people felt there had been no change.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-response=2

<sup>2</sup> Non-response=2

Interview respondents highlighted the value that they found in the Gentle Recovery founder's expertise in scar tissue recovery being built into the yoga programme, which engendered confidence to engage in the targeted exercises.

*"Because of India's understanding of scar tissue and recovery, a lot of her yoga is tailored specifically to people who had surgery to armpits and breast tissue and need to stretch those muscles and recover shoulder function. That is one of the very great differences, really, between ordinary yoga, if you like, at the local leisure center and India's programme is her knowledge of scar recovery is built into the programme."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]

*"It built my confidence again because I started doing the stretching. But you know, in a controlled, slow way. And I could actually feel at times. I could feel scar tissue breaking down, you know, I could feel where it was tight. But I knew ... it was a trusted program, that that was okay, rather than me sort of wading in and going back to exercise, I think I would have been thinking, 'Oh God, am I doing the right thing? Am I doing the wrong thing?'"* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 7]

### **Knowledge of nutrition**

Survey responses on the effect of Gentle Recovery on knowledge of nutrition, and the impact of this, were more mixed, with the majority (7 out of 12) reporting no change in levels of knowledge or confidence/impact, three reporting a little improvement/positive impact and two reporting a lot of improvement/positive impact.

The qualitative interviews potentially cast light on one reason for these more mixed findings. The modules on nutrition were useful for those who had not previously paid attention to diet due to work and time pressures, and conversely would be less useful for those who were already knowledgeable about this area. One user who described themselves as being in the first category said: *"Sorting nutrition – now [after Gentle Recovery] I've got my head around all of that. Now, I know what's good for me. Know what's not good for me."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2].

### **Knowledge of sleep hygiene**

Knowledge of sleep hygiene was a second area in which Gentle Recovery had more mixed effect. Four out of 12 reported no change in knowledge or impact. Just over half (7 out of 12) reported a little improvement in knowledge/positive impact; and only one reported a lot of improvement in knowledge/positive impact. Improved sleep was not highlighted by any of the qualitative interviewees as an impact they had experienced. However, some highlighted how useful they found learning about the practice of 'yoga nidra' (deep relaxation) and using this when sleep was challenged.

### **Taking a gentle approach**

For some users who had previously characterised themselves as always busy and/or stressed, one of the key physical benefits of Gentle Recovery was **learning to slow down, and the necessity of this for recovery from major medical treatment**. For some, this was an essential learning point, which enabled them to then progress to rebuild their physical fitness, as and when their body was ready.

*"It was like a revelation to me that it is possible to go gently and to take it slowly, just within your capabilities, and not to force myself to go and do exercise classes and ride my bike, and I was, I think I pushed myself so hard the first time [of having cancer treatment], I actually damaged myself. And so the second time around, I learned, thanks to India's approach, to go slowly and gently and within the limits of what your body's able to manage. And that has been so valuable that that's her approach, which works really well for me, because I'm such a headstrong, energetic person."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]

*"I'm one of those people that wants to get better, like now, and get on back to things now and push myself to, you know, if I don't feel like it, when I just got surely, well, do it, type of thing. That's my history. So I've learned just to be more gentle with myself, because our bodies are, you know, they do recover, they do heal, but they take time, and pushing does not help, 'no pain and no strain'."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6]

### **Increasing physical exercise**

**All participants surveyed felt that Gentle Recovery had had a positive impact on their physical fitness**, with a third (4 out of 12) reporting a large positive impact, and the remaining two thirds reporting a little positive impact. **Similarly, almost all felt that the programme had had a positive impact on physical flexibility**, with five out of 12 reporting a large positive impact, six reporting a little positive impact, and one no impact.

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents (7 out of 12) felt that their knowledge and confidence to practice yoga had improved a lot as a result of using the Gentle Recovery programme, with just over a third (4 out of 12) feeling it had improved a little. One person felt there had been no change. In terms of taking non-yoga physical exercise, a quarter (3 out of 12) felt their confidence had increased a lot as a result of Gentle Recovery, with a further five feeling it had improved a little and four reporting no change.

The vast majority (10 out of 12) of Gentle Recovery users who completed the survey said they currently did the NHS recommended minimum level of exercise – defined as 'moderate (e.g. brisk walking) or more intense exercise for 150 minutes a week or more'. This was already in place for the majority (7 out of 10) of this group. However, **the remaining three – who did not do this level of exercise prior to using the programme, all reported Gentle Recovery having had either a lot (1 out of 3) or a little (2 out of 3) influence in their decision to increase regular exercise to this level.**

For those who either were not particularly active prior to their diagnosis, or whose treatment had taken a large physical toll on them, the **accessibility and progression** of the programme was felt to be vital to enable them to start to increase their physical exercise, in a way that felt safe. One individual cited Gentle Recovery as the intervention that prevented her physical deterioration following treatment. She contextualised this by outlining that after treatment she could barely walk 200 yards, and after progressing through the GR programme was now walking 4-5 times a week, up to a distance of 2.5 miles

*"The most valuable thing about the programme was getting my body moving because I had 14 months of very heavy treatment, and because of the nature of it, you are just on your sofa and in bed. I am 76 and I'm very aware that that's the worst thing possible for me. So to get moving again, get my joints moving again, to do squats, various positions. I really value that really, really essential for me to do it. ... I probably wouldn't have done anything [without Gentle Recovery], and I would have deteriorated definitely, definitely. So this is like, it's fantastic. I need to be told what to do. I need the structure of this and in private, in my own home, so that I'm not judged."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 10]

*"It's, I don't know if you know about the couch to 5k running program? Well, it's a bit like that. You take people who are really unwell and unfit and show them how they can do a very tiny amount of exercise as a building block to start recovery. And that is, it's like being thrown a, what's it called? A life buoy. When you're drowning, you know that someone's actually shown you there is a path back, and if you follow this, you can get back your life. And that is so important to people who've reached the end of treatment."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]

Another user described how Gentle Recovery gave her a **roadmap to get her fitness back** to what it had been previously: *"The course has given me the stretching and the recovering*

*movements and all the rest of it, which, in turns, helps me be able to progress my way back into my sport I'm totally addicted to."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

In a related point, others highlighted how helpful it was to have the programme available to **start to regain mobility, fitness and strength as soon as safely possible after surgery**. This was made possible by the progressive nature of the Gentle Recovery programme, with the physical exercise modules building and becoming more challenging with each module.

*"As a program, from beginning to end, ... it's a bit more little bit more stretching, bit more challenging as the modules progress. I just think it was fantastic"* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 1].

Users who felt their physical recovery had been aided in these ways described different aspects of learning that underpinned these changes. One aspect that was highlighted was **learning a variety of tools that could be used to keep physically active**, to draw on according to energy and physical capacity, with the encouragement and assistance of the Gentle Recovery facilitator: *"[The tools to do this] are all laid out for you, and now you can actually do it, and I'm [referring to Gentle Recovery facilitator] going to help you to do it."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 9]

Others highlighted that they felt they gained a **better understanding of their bodies, their limits, and how to adapt exercise so it is accessible**. *"It's the way that India gives you, the tutorial, I suppose, of being able to understand which muscles, what the pose is, where you're benefiting from it most, the encouragement of 'stop if it's hurting, don't push too far'."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2]

This led, for some, to **feeling empowered that they could use this understanding to play a more active part in their own recovery**: *"Feeling I can be part of the journey to get back my own healing, that's more important than actually the medical treatment, because I've got to believe in my body again. I've got to believe in my onward journey."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 9]

Some users described a distinct **mindset shift as a result of Gentle Recovery, which was crucial in their changed relationship to physical exercise**. One theme was the shift toward embracing **exercise and/or movement as an important part of daily life**. One individual who had experienced this described it as a change in mindset to *"What can I do? How can I keep improving? It's about knowing your body and understanding it a bit better, rather than, 'Oh, I'm a bit tired today, so I better stay in'. It's kind of well, I could do a gentle walk and just see how far I'm comfortable.... I've changed my lifestyle, really... I'll go out for a walk. I try and do every day. And I've got to the stage where, if I don't get out for a walk, I get restless, which have never, there's never been me, you know, in the past."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 1]

Some individuals who had undergone **this shift in perception described their motivation being the knowledge gained on Gentle Recovery that regular exercise has been proven to reduce recurrence risk**: *"It's like a structure [of exercise], I suppose that you can, you can try and do and feel that you're, you're moving in, moving things in the right direction to reduce recurrence and get yourself healed."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 9]

For some participants, completing Gentle Recovery **built their confidence to go on to follow other progressive exercise programmes, to further the physical fitness they had built, or re-built**, using Gentle Recovery. These ranged from Personal Training to health consultancy to NHS 12-week exercise programmes to swimming.

Overall, interviewees described the following **physical impacts** as a result of using Gentle Recovery:

1. **Incorporation of regular or daily exercise** (see above).
2. **Improved physical strength** (particularly valued in areas which had become weak following treatment).  
*"It's just sort of nudged me in the direction of keeping body and mind sort of exercised in a way that's not something I've been familiar with in the past, but that enables it to be nurtured and to keep strong and supple, and, you know, and improve day by day."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]
3. **Improved mobility and suppleness** (particularly valued by those who were suffering from stiffness as a side effect of treatment).  
*"I could tell the days when I'd skipped it, because, you know, sort of 'God, I'm too busy', which I always regretted. But when I'd done it, I could definitely feel physically less, sort of stiff and awkward. And I really was struggling with stiffness."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 3]
4. **Increased energy**  
*"The energy that I sort of generate from doing my program, my exercise, my poses, etc., does actually benefit me and gives me, it's like a growing energy, and it's growing all the time."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2]

#### 4.3.2. Mental health



The Gentle Recovery programme was widely perceived to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, support self-confidence and social connection, and provide accessible tools—such as breathwork and peer support—that helped participants manage emotional challenges associated with their diagnosis, although its impact on body image was more limited.

##### **Stress, anxiety & depression**

A third of survey respondents (4 out of 12) felt that their **knowledge and confidence in using stress reduction techniques** (e.g. breathwork, meditation and relaxation) had improved a lot as a result of using the Gentle Recovery programme, with a further seven feeling it had improved a little. One person felt there had been no change. Figures for the **positive impact of Gentle Recovery on individuals' stress and anxiety** levels were similar: five out of 12 reported a large positive impact, six a little positive impact and one felt there had been no change.

The majority of survey respondents also felt that the Gentle Recovery programme was successful in **reducing depression**, with three-quarters reporting that it had had a little (six out of 12) or a large (three out of 12) positive effect on their levels of depression and low mood. One quarter felt that the programme had no effect on this area for them.

Interviewees described **using the stress reduction tools, such as breathing techniques, to help them combat the mental stress and worry** associated with their medical diagnosis:  
*"It just helps you, helps me, just be a bit more practical about it, kind of, almost compartmentalised, right? 'That's you spiraling. Put that to bed. Let's get back to normal. Let's do some breathing. Let's ground ourselves again.' So that's why I think those little tricks help."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 5]

Users also highlighted how **useful these techniques were when they were dealing with emotionally difficult medical situations** such as scans:

*"Some of the breathing techniques which are part of yoga, are really useful if you have to go to the hospital for unpleasant things. And just about everything you go to the hospital for is unpleasant. So if you're going for a scan, or you're going for a blood test or you're going for*

*some kind of investigation, to be able to just calm yourself and go into a yoga breathing routine is an absolute godsend.*" [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]

Others described how having these tools – alongside yoga – gave them a **method of 'resetting' when they felt anxious** or otherwise mentally challenged, allowing them to keep going with a decreased mental burden:

*"There's been several breath techniques that I go back to regularly if I get sort of feel anxious, or feel a hot flush coming on, or feel sort of in a sort of challenging kind of mood. But also I can go into some of the yoga poses, just to sort of take a moment and just sort of doing something feels like a positive influence. And you can kind of get up and start again."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

Another participant described a key learning from the programme as being that *"stopping and breathing, relaxing, meditating is as beneficial as movement and nutrition."* [Gentle Recovery User, Survey respondent 8]

Another theme for some was the **value of the broader mental health education** in the Gentle Recovery programme – **specifically gaining knowledge of interaction of the stress reduction breathing techniques with levels of stress hormones and mental health**. One participant described as a 'massive awakening' that she could improve her stress levels with *"breath work, by the calming influence of the routines, and ... it's all kind of allowing your cortisol and your system to sort of calm down, which in turn, kind of improves your feelings of wellbeing. And so your mental, you know, the brain starts to sort of calm down, so your mental health starts to improve."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

### **Body image and self-confidence**

Improved body image was a mental health outcome which was less directly targeted by Gentle Recovery, which is potentially the reason results were more mixed for this aspect of mental health. Four out of 12 survey respondents felt that Gentle Recovery had had a little positive impact on their body image, with a further one person reporting a large positive impact. Just over half (7 out of 12) reported no impact.

Survey results showed a slightly stronger impact on self-confidence, with just over half of respondents reporting that Gentle Recovery had had a little (five out of 12) or a large (two out of 12) positive impact on this aspect of mental health. Five out of 12 felt there had been no impact.

Qualitative interviews cast light on one of the potential ways in which Gentle Recovery was able to help users with their self-esteem, with one user outlining how connecting with others in the same situation as her helped to **decrease feelings of self-blame** for the situation she found herself in:

*"I looked at these other people, I thought, well, they haven't done anything that caused it any more than I had, but there was something about not feeling so alone in it all, and that there were perfectly normal people who've led perfectly normal lives, not dissimilar to your own, who got caught with this as well, and none of us were to blame."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 3]

### **Social connectedness**

The online community forum (The Community Tree) and the monthly online group Q&A discussion sessions with India are the aspects of the Gentle Recovery programme that aim to offer – amongst other things – the opportunity for people to connect with others in a similar medical diagnosis.

Survey results show a relatively even split between those that felt that Gentle Recovery had positively impacted their level of social connectedness, with six out of 12 reporting a little

impact, and a further one feeling there had been a large impact. Five out of 12 felt there had been no change.

Interviewees highlighted that one aspect of the programme related to this area which was appreciated, was the **chance to connect with others who had been through similar challenges**, which could be helpful as it underlined that they were not alone in going through this situation.

*"Within those sessions, there have been other people that are on the [Gentle Recovery programme], sort of to share experiences with. So that kind of feels like you're sort of not alone, which is great."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

This sense of shared experience also meant that some individuals felt they could **open up and get peer support, feeling safe in the knowledge that they would be understood**. *"I think it's being with those like-minded people and, you know, sometimes there were Zoom calls, you know, people, people got upset. And I think it's just having that safe space. It's different when you're amongst people that you don't have to explain things to."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 7]

Users also appreciated the **opportunity to share learning** with, and learn from, others regarding how to cope with treatment. *"Somebody came on who sort of said, 'Oh, I've had problems with lymphoedema'. And you know, I could say, 'Well, look, this is what I did. I did the taping, and I did this series of exercises, obviously, asked the breast clinic, but, you know, I got it under control', and I think that was probably helpful for other people."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 3]

Additionally, some found **reassurance from others with shared experience** about the pace of recovery. *"It's really the fact I was able to talk to those ladies online and they say, 'Oh, I had my operation x months ago... and I'm still not back to normal'. Then I started to think, 'Right it's not just me', because you start thinking, 'Well, I should be back to normal. Why am I feeling this?'"* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 5]

This widening of individuals' support network had the knock-on effect for some of **relieving feelings of guilt at over-burdening their existing friends and family**. *"There was a little bit of connection through the community side of it, the community tree side of it, and the monthly offerings on ... Zoom, or Google Meet, or whatever it was, which is just nice to kind of be able to have a little chat about stuff, but without feeling like you're burdening your friends or your husband."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

Some users gained particular **encouragement from the sharing of stories of physical recovery** in the Q&A sessions, which gave hope and fuelled motivation. *"And I remember being encouraged by someone who couldn't raise their arm before ... After I had my operation, and I remember, you know, [hearing that] somebody couldn't do something and now can. That just is quite a motivator. It's a big motivator, actually."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6]

As well as the peer learning and support, also highlighted was the **value of the advice from India** received from the Q&A sessions: *"It was absolutely brilliant and is a real lifeline. [The] advice is excellent as well as meeting others."* [Gentle Recovery User, Survey Respondent12]

Some also **appreciated others sharing positive stories** about what activities they were doing and gained encouragement from this. However, **others described being put off by seeing others' achievements displayed**, if they did not feel able to get involved in similar activities themselves.

For some individuals, the online nature of the Community Tree and monthly discussion sessions **offered an important way into accessing peer support**, with some articulating that they would have felt uncomfortable going into face-to-face support groups straight away, and were able to progress to that through first putting in written questions and moving on to the online support sessions from there, once they felt at ease.

Those interviewed **who did not engage with the Community Tree** or online discussions described themselves as not enjoying social media in general, so avoiding online communications; not enjoying group situations in general, so not being drawn to participate; or having had negative experiences with online groups in the past.

### 4.3.3. Participants' longer-term perspective



**Three-quarters of participants felt that Gentle Recovery had positively influenced their long-term outlook or lifestyle—helping them feel more optimistic, prioritise self-care, adopt healthier routines, and process their diagnosis in a way that enabled greater balance, mindfulness, and enjoyment of life.**

Survey and interview respondents were asked whether their experience on the Gentle Recovery programme had influenced their longer-term perspective, or the way they choose to live, in any way. A quarter of survey respondents (3 out of 12) felt it had not. However, **half (6 out of 12) felt the programme had influenced the way they choose to live/their perspective, and further quarter thought it may have.** Aspects of life that the latter two groups highlighted as changed as a result of Gentle Recovery were:

- **Feeling more positive about the future.**
- **Prioritising time for themselves.**
- **Learning to relax and destress.**
- **Learning to listen to their body**; learning to “treat themselves with kindness.” [Survey respondent 10]
- Feeling like they now had the **tools to look after themselves**, physically and mentally. *“I feel like I am a different person to the one that started the course. My continued use of the yoga learning and how to look after myself, keep lymph system moving and to calm my system when heightened, has given me a really strong toolbox to tackle difficult times and move forward in a positive and strong way.”* [Survey participant 4]

Interviewees were asked the same question, and - for those that felt there had been a perspective shift as a result of the programme - some additional themes were discussed:

- **Learning to be more balanced in life:** *“It’s like discovering another gear so that, you know, instead of having a normal gear and a fast gear, I now have a slow gear as well.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 4]
- **Prioritising regular exercise** to ensure staying as healthy as possible: *“Gentle Recovery has helped me prioritise what has helped me in terms of, I know I’ve got a structure now, and because I know that being keeping myself fit is important, and keeping myself active is important. So it’s given me a structure to work within. Structure, you know: morning time on my mat and going out for a walk every day... And that’s not something I used to do.”* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 6]
- **Incorporating a more holistic exercise programme** – including yoga, stretching and mobility, alongside cardio and weights.

*"I think part of me has always wanted to be a regular yoga person, and part of me has never had the patience to be one thing, and I've never, never given it enough priority or enough. Never understood it enough to realise that how useful, especially as you're getting older, and especially when you're recovering from something, how powerful it can be. So I think it's, yeah, it's changing me for the better, I think."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 8]

- **Incorporating mindfulness into daily life.**
- **Processing the difficult experience of diagnosis and treatment** – allowing enjoyment of life post-treatment: *"[Gentle Recovery] has been, well, it's been significant. It's been the thing that has absolutely turned me around and now start to enjoy retirement. The transformation of myself, totally processed finishing work that's all okay, and retired and yeah, loving it absolutely. ... Now, I know what's good for me. Know what's not good for me... I think having this programme just helped me, sort of focus on me internally and work on me, and that really does help with the processing of it all."* [Gentle Recovery User, Interview Participant 2]

## 5. Potential improvements to Gentle Recovery

Both survey respondents and interviewees were asked whether they had any suggestions for improvements to Gentle Recovery. Many said they had no improvements to suggest. Responses have been grouped into the following themes:

- **Programme administration**
  - Set a programme of talks and workshops well in advance so that people can plan their timetable to attend. If changes have to be made, allow as much notice as possible.
  - Clarify the signposting regarding what needs to happen in order to progress to the next module.
  - Have Gentle Recovery available as an app rather than only on a website, for ease of use.
- **Yoga & other modules**
  - Some of those who had done a lot of yoga previously felt that the pace/level of yoga was not challenging enough. However, most acknowledged that this was needed to keep the classes accessible to all. A potential solution was suggested: that more options for stronger poses were included for those with more experience.
  - Some felt the sound and visual quality of the yoga videos could be further improved.
  - Some would welcome advice on natural (supplementary) remedies.
- **One-to-one sessions**
  - Offering the opportunity to pay for a one-to-one taster session prior to signing up to the 12-module programme was valued by those who had done this. It was suggested that these are offered more routinely.
  - Other related suggestions included adding the option to meet one-to-one half-way through, to assess progress, and at the end of the programme, to plan how to continue the practices after the 12-module package ended.
- **Funding**
  - Some who were offered a funded place said they would like to have the chance to give something back to help others take advantage of the programme. Suggestions included sponsoring another's place, a mat or an in-person taster session.
  - Offer monthly or six-monthly payment plans, to make the programme more affordable for those on a low income.
  - There was interest from some in a monthly rolling membership programme after the 12-module course for those that wanted to continue the support of the programme for longer.
  - Some would welcome having Gentle Recovery made available as part of the standard treatment plan, rather than an additional offer.
- **Community Tree**
  - Create sub-groups that cater to specific interests.
  - There was interest in whether people could continue to be part of the Community Tree after completing the 12-module programme, so they are still linked to the Gentle Recovery community.
  - Some felt the Community Tree may benefit if there were some opportunities to meet fellow Gentle Recovery users in person (e.g. some in-person Q&A

sessions), as this may make people feel more comfortable to post on the community board.

## 6. Recommendations for future evaluation

The current evaluation has notable strengths, including the triangulation of qualitative depth interview data and multiple strands of quantitative data (cross-sectional bespoke and longitudinal EORTC surveys). However, there are limitations to the current study, and associated recommendations for areas to build on in future evaluations of this programme:

- The survey respondent rate for the bespoke cross-sectional survey was 21 percent (12 out of a potential 57). It is possible that those who chose to respond to the survey – and the invitation to be interviewed - were individuals who had received more benefits from Gentle Recovery. With a longer-term evaluation, more insight could be gained into those who do not complete the Gentle Recovery by regularly capturing data from users as they sign up and progress (or not) along the programme.
- The number of participants who had both completed the Gentle Recovery programme and the EORTC assessment of quality of life was also relatively low (n=19). It would be beneficial to conduct a follow-up evaluation when there is a larger post-programme group to use to compare EORTC results. If resources allow, future evaluation would also benefit from a matched comparison group drawn from Torbay Breast Care Unit's patients who choose not to take up Gentle Recovery. This would provide stronger quantitative evidence of the difference made by the programme to users' self-assessed quality of life, compared to those in a similar medical situation who do not complete it.

## 7. Conclusion

### Physical health

Use of the Gentle Recovery programme was associated with a small overall improvement in quality of life scores (measured using the EORTC short-form survey). Additionally, the vast majority of Gentle Recovery users surveyed thought their motivation to make positive shifts in their life had improved as a result of using the programme. All participants surveyed felt that Gentle Recovery had had a positive impact on their physical fitness. Similarly, almost all felt that the programme had had a positive impact on physical flexibility. There is evidence that Gentle Recovery was influential in moving some people towards undertaking the recommended NHS levels of regular exercise, who were not previously doing regular levels of exercise at this level.

Reasons behind these changes include:

- Imparting an understanding of individuals' bodies - including temporary or permanent limitations – and how to adapt exercise to make it accessible.
- The progressive nature of the programme.
- Teaching people a variety of tools to keep physically active.
- Empowering people to feel they can play a part in their recovery, including knowledge of the role of exercise in reducing risk of cancer recurrence.
- Encouraging a mindset shift toward embracing movement/exercise as part of daily life.

Management of treatment side-effects also showed promising results, with the majority of users surveyed reporting improved knowledge of how to manage lymphoedema and scar tissue. Results were more mixed for impact on nutrition and sleep hygiene, with around half reporting no change for nutrition and a third no change for sleep hygiene.

### Mental health

Mental health impacts attributed by participants to use of the programme tell a similar story, with the majority of those surveyed reporting that Gentle Recovery had a positive impact on:

- Levels of stress and anxiety,
- Levels of low mood/depression,
- Longer-term perspective and/or the way they live.

Participants who experienced benefits to their mental health from Gentle Recovery described how helpful the stress reduction tools, such as breathing techniques, were to help them combat the mental stress and worry associated with their medical diagnosis. Value was also attached to the broader mental health education in the Gentle Recovery programme – specifically gaining knowledge of interaction of the stress reduction breathing techniques with levels of stress hormones and mental health.

Results show the impact of Gentle Recovery on body image and self-confidence were more mixed, with around half of users reporting the programme had no effect on these areas. One potential reason for this is that these are less directly targeted by the Gentle Recovery activities.

Results were also mixed for the impact of the programme on feelings of social connectedness, with just under half reporting no effect. However, qualitative results also show that, for some users, the social aspects of Gentle Recovery are really valued. Reasons outlined for this included:

- The chance to connect with others who had been through similar challenges.
- Feeling able open up and get peer support, in the knowledge that they would be understood.

- The opportunity to share learning with, and learn from, others regarding how to cope with treatment.
- Gaining encouragement from hearing stories of physical recovery.

**Overall impact**

Overall, evaluation evidence shows that Gentle Recovery has had a significant positive impact for many of its users, with evidence showing short- and long-term benefits across both physical and mental wellbeing. Crucially, it has highlighted that Gentle Recovery addresses an otherwise unmet need for patients dealing with cancer treatment, by offering a supported and holistic route back to physical, psychological and emotional recovery.

## 8. References

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: EORTC IL226 Questionnaire

**Patients sometimes report that they have the following symptoms or problems. Please indicate the extent to which you have experienced these symptoms or problems during the past week.**

**(Not at all: 1; A little: 2; Quite a bit: 3; Very much: 4)**

**During the past week:**

1. Have you worried about your health?
2. Have you felt physically less attractive as a result of your disease or treatment?
3. Have you been dissatisfied with your body?
4. Have you worried about your health in the future?
5. Have you had pain in your arm(s) or shoulder(s)?
6. Have you had problems raising your arm or moving it sideways?
7. Have you had any pain in the area of your affected breast?
8. Has the area of your affected breast been swollen?
9. Have you had problems with your joints?
10. Have you had stiffness in your joints?
11. Have you had pain in your joints?
12. Have you had aches or pains in your muscles?
13. Has weight gain been a problem for you?

## Appendix 2: Cross-sectional Evaluation Survey Questionnaire

### **Intro/Consent text**

Health Innovation South West is evaluating Gentle Recovery. We are interested in getting an understanding of your experience of using the programme – what has worked well for you, what could be improved, and any benefits you may have felt.

Your responses will be anonymous, that means that we will NOT know who has completed this survey, so please be honest. The responses from your completed survey will be used, together with the anonymised responses from all of the individuals who complete the survey, to give us a picture of participants' experience of Gentle Recovery. These findings will be written up as part of a service evaluation that will be shared publicly.

Completion of this survey is completely voluntary and will not affect your participation in Gentle Recovery.

**By completing the survey you are consenting to our use of your anonymised data for the purposes set out above.**

For more information on how Health Innovation South West collects and processes personal data in order to provide its services please visit [www.healthinnovationsouthwest.com/privacy-statement](http://www.healthinnovationsouthwest.com/privacy-statement).

Thank you in advance for supporting the evaluation of Gentle Recovery.

**The survey will take around 10-15 minutes to complete.**

### **Reach and recruitment**

What is your age?

What is your ethnicity?

- Asian or Asian British
- Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
- Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- White
- Other ethnic group

Did you start using Gentle Recovery while you were still having active treatment (i.e. chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy; not including Tamoxifen/Anastrozole or Letrozole)?

- Started while having active treatment
- Started after finishing active treatment

Are you still using Gentle Recovery?

- Yes/No

*If you are no longer using Gentle Recovery:*

How long ago did you finish?

### **Barriers to attending in-person classes**

Did you attend in-person yoga classes either offered by the Breast Unit at Torbay Hospital or elsewhere?

- Yes

- No

If you did not attend, please select any of the following reasons for this that apply:

- Financial (cost of class for non-hospital class attendance)
- Financial (needed to work limiting time to attend fixed-time classes)
- Travel distance/time to in-person class
- Confidence (felt uncomfortable exercising in a group setting)
- Other – please specify:  
[Open text]

### **Experience**

Was the online (rather than in-person) delivery mode of Gentle Recovery a positive or negative for you?

- Positive
- Neither positive or negative
- Negative

If you have any further comments about this, please add here:

[Open text]

Which elements of the programme do you feel have been most valuable to you? Please select all that apply.

- Yoga classes (i.e. recorded videos)
- Lymphatic drainage exercises
- Stress reduction techniques (Relaxation exercises, meditation, breathwork)
- Walking programme
- Educational elements (e.g. nutrition, sleep, managing treatment side effects or menopause symptoms)
- The Community Tree
- Online group - Q&A and topic-based virtual sessions
- Other – please specify  
[Open text]

*For those that started Gentle Recovery during treatment:*

How did you use the Gentle Recovery programme to help you through this period?

[Open text]

### **Barriers to experience**

Has anything prevented you using Gentle Recovery as much as you would have liked? Please select all that apply:

- Time
- Motivation
- State of health
- Content not being as expected
- Too much information/overwhelm
- Online nature of programme
- Difficulty navigating the programme online
- Other – please specify  
[Open text]

Please add further comments about any barriers you experienced to using Gentle Recovery, if you would like to

[Open text]

Has anything prevented you specifically using the Community Tree and/or online group Q&A sessions?

- Yes
- No

If yes:

Please note the reasons here:

[Open text]

**Impact**

Do you feel your level of **knowledge and/or confidence** has changed in any of the following areas **as a result of** using Gentle Recovery?

		Improved a lot	Improved a little	No change	Decreased a little	Decreased a lot
<b>Physical health</b>	Practising yoga					
	Taking non-yoga exercise e.g. walking					
	Managing/stretching scar tissue					
	Managing lymphoedema					
	Managing other treatment side-effects (e.g. joint pain, menopausal symptoms)					
	Sleep hygiene					
	Nutrition					
<b>Mental health</b>	Using stress reduction techniques (e.g. breathwork, meditation, relaxation)					
	Body image					
	Self-esteem					
	Making social connections					

Do you feel your **motivation to make positive shifts** in your life has changed as a result of using Gentle Recovery?

- Improved a lot
- Improved a little
- No change
- Decreased a little
- Decreased a lot
- Don't know

If changed:

Can you give an example of something that you have changed in your life as a result of Gentle Recovery?

[Open text]

Please add further details here of the impact you have experienced from Gentle Recovery if you would like to:

[Open text]

Do you feel the way you live now/your perspective has changed as a result of using the Gentle Recovery programme?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

*If yes:*

Please comment on how and why this has changed:

[Open text]

Do you regularly do moderate (e.g. brisk walking) or more intense exercise for 150 mins a week or more?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

*If yes:*

Did you regularly do this level of exercise before using Gentle Recovery?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

*If you did not previously do this level of exercise:*

How influential was Gentle Recovery in your decision to increase your exercise to this level?

- A lot
- A little
- Not at all
- Don't know

### **Improvements / General comments**

Is there anything about the Gentle Recovery programme that you did not enjoy?

[Open text]

Do you have any suggestions for improving the Gentle Recovery programme?

[Open text]

Are there any other comments you would like to make about Gentle Recovery or your experience of using it?

[Open text]

## Appendix 3: Evaluation Qualitative Interview Guide

### 1. Intro/warm-up

More 'factual' questions to warm-up and give information to frame subsequent questions and analysis

- How did you hear about the GR programme?
- Were you offered a funded/'free' place on the programme?
  - Quick check: took this up?
- How long have you been doing the GR programme? Do you know how many modules you have completed?
- Did you start the programme during treatment or after you finished?
- Did you regularly do yoga or other exercise before joining GR?

### 2. Reach & Recruitment / Barriers to attending in-person classes

- What made you decide to join GR?
  - Did the programme being online rather than in-person influence your decision?
  - What are the positives/negatives of it being online for you?
- Have you also attended in-person yoga classes offered by Torbay Hospital?  
If no:
  - Were you offered or made aware of these classes?
  - What made you decide not to take up the in-person classes?
    - Prompt if needed: time/day of class not suiting; financial (needing to be at work); travel time/logistics; confidence/feeling uncomfortable in group 'exercise' scenario; not wanting to attend at location of treatment.
- Have you also attended in-person Moving on Group classes offered by Torbay Hospital?

If no:

- Were you offered or made aware of these classes?
- What made you decide not to take up the in-person classes?
  - Prompt if needed: time/day of class not suiting; financial (needing to be at work); travel time/logistics; confidence/feeling uncomfortable in group 'exercise' scenario; not wanting to attend at location of treatment.

### 3. Experience and impact

- How have you found the GR programme overall?

#### Most useful aspects/changes

- What have you found most valuable about the programme? Why?

Prompt (only if needed)

- Different elements of modules (yoga classes, relaxation techniques, lymphatic drainage exercises, educational modules e.g. nutrition & sleep, reflection prompts).
- Community forum

- What changes have you experienced as a result of the programme?

Prompt [if needed] on aspects mentioned as most valuable

- *How has knowledge/confidence/motivation*
- *How has behaviour changed*
- *What helped/hindered these changes*

For those who have completed the 12 modules of the programme:

- How much did these changes continue after finishing GR programme – if at all?

- *What helped/hindered these longer-lasting changes*
- Do you feel the way you live now/choices you make has changed since you started the GR programme?

If yes:

- In what way AND
- How much was this to do with the GR programme? Probe on reasons.

For those that started GR during treatment:

- How did the GR programme support you during treatment?
- What was particularly helpful for you?
- Anything that was less helpful?

Least useful aspects/Barriers

- What have you found less valuable (if anything) about the programme? Why?

Prompt (only if needed)

- Different elements of modules (yoga classes, recorded relaxation audio, lymphatic drainage exercises, educational modules e.g. nutrition, sleep, reflection ideas).
- Community forum
- What prevented you enjoying/engaging with these aspects (if anything)?  
*Probe on barriers mentioned*

Social connectedness impact (if not explored above)

- What was your experience of using the Community Tree (online community forum and Q&A)?

*If used it:*

- What did you gain from experience?  
Probe on feeling socially connected to others in similar situation.
- Anything you enjoyed less?
- Did experience influence you to seek other groups/forums for social support? How?

*If did not use it:*

- What put you off using the forum?
- Suggestions for improvement?

**4. Any other comments would like to make about Gentle Recovery or experience using it?**

Health Innovation South West  
Vantage Point  
Pynes Hill  
Exeter, EX2 5FD  
T 01392 247309  
E [info@healthinnovationsouthwest.com](mailto:info@healthinnovationsouthwest.com)

Registered company number 08495463

<https://healthinnovationsouthwest.com/>

Follow us on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/health-innovation-south-west/mycompany/>

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