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RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

How One Woman Found Freedom From RA

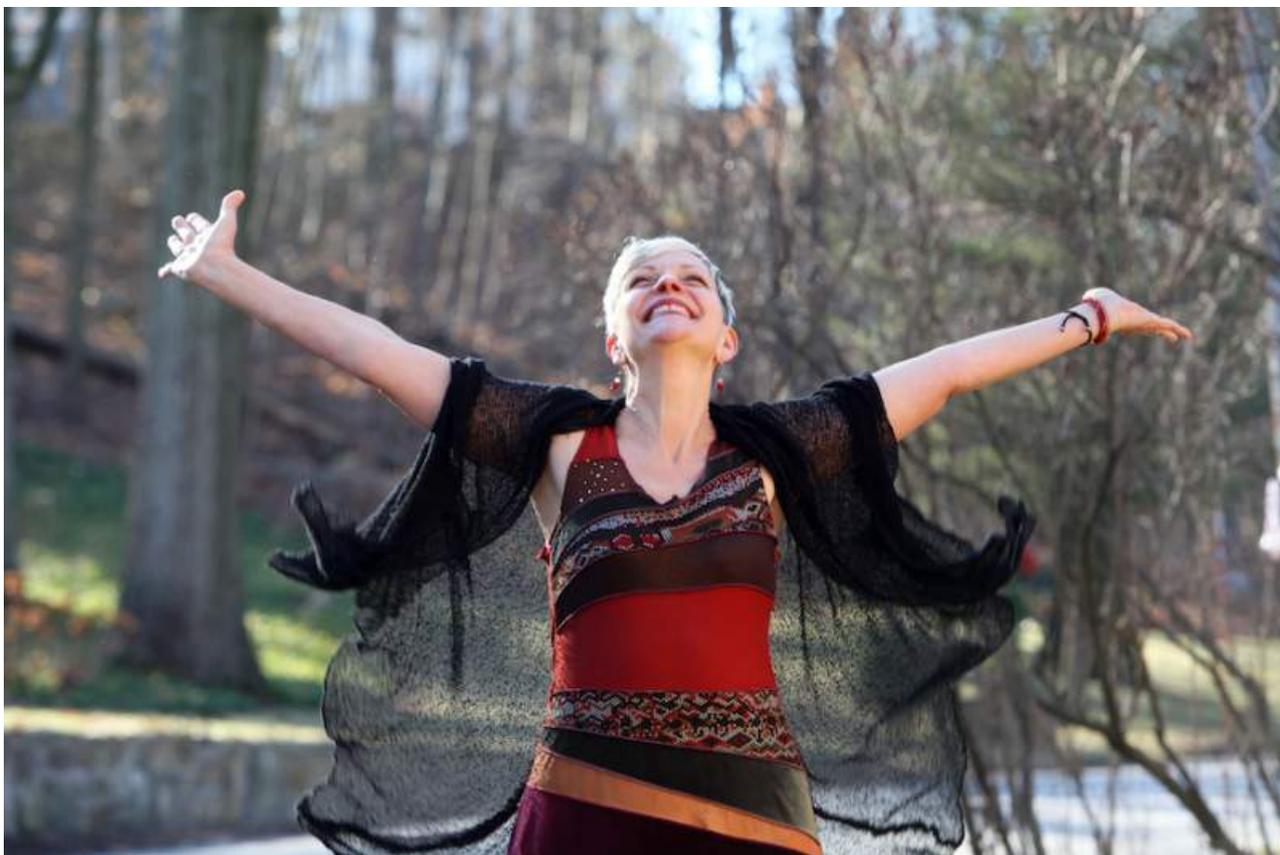
When rheumatoid arthritis threatened to lock up her life, Teresa D'Angelo found an escape. Get ready for some #HappyTears!



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Lizzy Sullivan

In a sun-dappled dance studio with floor-to-ceiling windows in Summit, NJ, Teresa D'Angelo is leading a class full of female students through a series of graceful, flowing moves. They raise their arms to the sky and sway side to side, their heads tossed back with abandon. They bow down towards their bare feet, sweeping their hands along the floor as if gathering leaves from a garden, then transition into a series of sensual shoulder rolls.

Now, the pace changes. D'Angelo, who rocks a blonde pixie cut and has a radiant, infectious smile, begins performing a series of sidekicks, upward blocks, and other martial arts-inspired moves. The women follow along, full of fierce determination, but the grins never once leaving their faces. After 60 minutes, they end class in a warm group embrace, beaming and trading words of support and encouragement.

After everyone had gone home, D'Angelo spends a bit more time in the studio, this time dancing solo. In her hands is a pumpkin-colored silk scarf, which she traces through the air as she completes a series of balletic twirls, dipping down low then rising up on her tiptoes. With the sun streaming in and the scarf billowing in the air, she looks like a triumphant butterfly.

You would never know that several years prior, D'Angelo spent her days lying on a couch in her living room, racked by excruciating joint pain and inflammation from rheumatoid arthritis (RA). She needed a cane to make it to another room and moved up and down the stairs by scooting on her bottom. Turning a doorknob was impossible. One day, she caught sight of herself hunched over in a mirror and thought, "Oh my God, is this what the rest of my life is going to be like?"

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The answer, she ultimately decided: Hell, no. This is the story of her transformation, made possible by a chance encounter with a doctor and a decision D'Angelo, now 58, made to listen to her body and start moving the way it wanted to.



Lizzy Sullivan

Her Body Started to Betray Her

In 2005, D'Angelo was working for an international accounting and consulting firm in a job that paid well but required sitting at a desk for up to 10 hours a day and left her feeling boxed in and spiritually stifled. None of this was a great fit for the former ballet dancer who, as a young girl in the '70s, had aspired to become a prima ballerina. Her hopes were extinguished at the age of 15 by an instructor named Miss J, who always wore black leotards, black rock-star eyeliner, and raised her voice a lot. "If she yelled at you, it meant she took interest," D'Angelo recalls. "I don't remember being yelled at a lot."

After that, she threw her energy into high school and college, where she discovered a new love, communications. She was a radio DJ in undergrad, a weekend weather anchor while earning her master's degree, and later, a managing editor. "I'm not shy, but I've always been on the quieter side, so I loved how these jobs gave me the chance to speak out and communicate with many people at once," she says.

In May of 2005 D'Angelo began experiencing some brain fog. "I was

having trouble absorbing information and struggling to react quickly at work, which was impacting my job because it was a stressful, high-performing environment,” D’Angelo recalls now. After a few months of mental fuzziness, another bizarre symptom hit. “One day I noticed some swelling and pain in my left foot,” she says. “It came out of nowhere.”

She told her naturopathic doctor, who directed her to a primary-care doctor, who in turn suggested she see a rheumatologist. That specialist diagnosed D’Angelo with psoriatic arthritis (PsA), an autoimmune disease characterized by joint pain and stiffness plus psoriasis, a skin condition that causes red lesions that can burn, sting, or itch. (D’Angelo didn’t have lesions, but says her doctor based the diagnosis on bloodwork and her description of her pain. Some patients with PsA don’t have the skin component.)

The doctor prescribed a biologic medication, a type of potent anti-inflammatory. D’Angelo, who had for decades relied on herbal tinctures, green juices, probiotic-rich foods and other “alternative” therapies to maintain her health, initially balked at the suggestion. But when even her naturopathic doctor said he didn’t think he could help her, D’Angelo filled the prescription and, to her surprise and delight, began to feel better. The relief, she says, made her a bit cocky and she stopped taking the drug without asking her physician. It turned out to be the wrong move.

By the fall of 2005, pain and swelling began to hit her wrists and knees. The fact that her new symptoms were double-sided did not go unnoticed by her doctors. “They said rheumatoid arthritis usually affects the joints symmetrically, but psoriatic arthritic tends to be just one-sided.” That, along with further bloodwork, prompted D’Angelo’s rheumatologist to change her diagnosis to RA and prescribe prednisone.

The powerful steroid worked intermittently—D’Angelo, at this point 43 years old, would have good days, going to work and the gym and playing catch outside with her son, Michael...and bad days, where her knees would swell with fluid, forcing her to use a cane.



Lizzy Sullivan

With Pain Under Control, She Found Her Way Back to Dance

At a routine appointment with her naturopath (“I was still throwing everything I could at my RA in addition to my medication,” she says), D’Angelo’s doctor, noticing her increasing stiffness, said: “You need to start moving your body. What do you like to do?” She mentioned that she used to be a dancer. That prompted him to mention a movement-based mind-body practice called Nia.

Blending movements and philosophies from the worlds of dance, martial arts, and mindfulness, Nia is a non-impact workout that’s performed barefoot, set to a diverse array of music (Latin, Jazz, Indian, and hip-hop, to name a few), and based on the premise that health can be discovered—or re-discovered—through conscious, meditative movement.

Exhilarated by the notion, D’Angelo took a Nia class and “instantly fell in love with it. It was like nothing I’d ever done before. In ballet, I was always told exactly how to move. In Nia, you’re given permission to move exactly how your body tells you.”

During that first class, D’Angelo noticed her body soften. “The pain and stiffness were still there, but I felt peaceful and connected to myself.” A sense of joy and relief flooded her body. “I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m moving again.’”

With more classes came more self-discovery and introspection...and some RA symptom relief. “Like so many people, I started life as a vibrant soul with fantastic dreams and a creative imagination. But over time, the real me, the passionate and lively me, started to become quiet. My voice shut down and my body soon followed.”

Now, dabbling in Nia’s 52 classic moves—which at times resemble belly dancing, tai chi, ballet, and even salsa dancing—the old D’Angelo was back. “Through these shapes and movements, I could say and show what was going on inside of me. I was expressing through my body what had been bottled inside for many years—my voice.”

Her Pain Returned at the Worst Moment

Her love of dance rekindled, D’Angelo signed up to become a Nia instructor herself. She made it halfway through her weeklong training in November of 2005, only to be sidelined by pain. “I was on the floor of the studio, crying because it hurt to move, and a trainer, who I loved, said, ‘It’s OK, don’t push yourself. Rest. It will be OK.’” Devastated, she reluctantly pulled out of training.

In early 2006, after a few months of rest combined with home Nia practice (“I would pull myself together and practice one routine a night”), D’Angelo became officially certified as a Nia White Belt Instructor. (Like martial arts, Nia certification levels involve different colored belts). She soon began teaching a regular Saturday class at a local wellness center. Her dance dreams were finally coming to fruition.

One night shortly thereafter, D’Angelo woke up screaming in pain. “It felt like razor blades were cutting my wrists from the inside,” she says. As her new husband Mike (they had married in August) tried to comfort her, she prayed out loud, begging for relief.

This cycle was the first of many highs and lows that were to come over the next two years, as D’Angelo continued working for her firm and teaching Nia on Saturdays. On one hand, she had the satisfaction of knowing she was helping other women—some living with chronic illness—find a release from stress, and often pain (many Nia practitioners discover the class during a chronic-pain journey). On the other hand, she

would spend weeks off and on steroids and “never knew when the inflammation would hit. I could have a great class one day, tons of energy, no pain, then wake up the next morning and have trouble getting out of bed.”



Lizzy Sullivan

A New Doctor (and New Meds) Would Make All the Difference

Things took a turn for the worse between 2008 and 2011. Her wrists and occasionally ankles hurt. Her knee needed to be drained with a needle every few weeks to release fluid build-up. A headache so bad she feared it was a brain tumor sent her to the emergency room. When travelling on firm business, she'd leave team dinners early to go to bed and strategically wore a neoprene arm brace so colleagues and new associates wouldn't shake her hand, as “doing so would leave me screeching in pain.” She took three leaves of absence from work between 2005-2011.

In 2011, after several months of being couch-bound and unable to teach Nia, let alone work, D'Angelo had a doctor's appointment. She was

surprised to learn her rheumatologist was out and she'd be seeing a different specialist that day. That fresh set of eyes turned out to be a blessing for D'Angelo. "She said, 'Let's take you off these high doses of prednisone and try to find another medication that actually will help you.'"

The next few months were spent experimenting with multiple RA drugs. No luck. Then, in January of 2012, the doctor wanted to try yet another. The whole process had been intimidating. But so was the thought of not being able to sway and twirl and be in her body the way Nia allowed her to be.

"At home that day, lying on the couch, I remember asking God, 'What do you want me to do?'" she recalls. "And like a waterfall of calm, I felt the words, 'Take the medicine' wash over me."

Around the same time, a friend who is an integrative psychotherapist visited Teresa at home. "She asked me, 'What is your vision of yourself?' I said, 'I see myself as a ballet dancer, leaping over the moon.'" D'Angelo's friend replied, "Hold that vision."

Together, those two key events convinced her to try the new treatment. Slowly, she began feeling less fatigued. Her joint inflammation lessened. Her pain reduced. By March, about two months after starting, she started to feel like herself again and was cleared by her rheumatologist to return to work.

Just a few days later, she received a call from human resources; she was being laid off. D'Angelo's response?

"I put the phone on mute, pumped my fist, and said 'YES!' That job had been so stressful for so many years. I thought maybe now I could start helping people who were like me and show them how to use movement to regain their life and wellness." Maybe, she thought, she could even turn it into a business.



Lizzy Sullivan

Losing Her Job Pushed Her to Find Her Purpose

In 2014, she launched [Live Love Move](#), a company based in Parsippany, NJ, where she lives now, that offers mindful movement classes, workshops, and retreats for women, particularly those living with chronic pain. Now a first-degree black-belt instructor and certified massage therapist who's also working on her certification in dance movement therapy, D'Angelo works with students who range from teachers and nurses to CEOs and stay-at-home moms. "When they start to move, they sometimes cry simply because the act of lifting your hands to the sky can feel so empowering and releasing," she describes. "The trauma of their illness has been locked inside. Now, they feel heard and seen."

D'Angelo, is still taking the same medicine and is more or less pain-free. She does have osteoporosis in her right hip, which her doctor believes is a result of years of steroid use, and occasional morning stiffness, which she describes as "crankiness in my knees and wrists."

Nutrition plays a big role in her life; she follows an anti-inflammatory diet, avoids gluten and tries to limit sugar to what she gets from fruit. "My doctor tells me: 'Whatever you're doing, keep doing it.'"

Equally important has been recasting her RA diagnosis as a gift, something she says took her nearly a decade to do. Ultimately, though, "the pain of not being able to move, of believing my body betrayed me, it helped me to seek and find the gift of my voice through dance. I not only feel better physically, but I handle stress better. Now, it's my mission to

educate and inspire others...anybody who hasn't moved in a long time or wants to move differently.”

When meeting with a new group, she usually kicks things off with these words: *“Hi, I’m Teresa D’Angelo. I help support people who are in pain to help them feel better through healing movement. Even if you can just move a finger, ankle, or toe, know that pain is not the end of your story.”*



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Leslie Goldman is a health and wellness writer who regularly contributes feature stories and essays to *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Women’s Health*, *Parents*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and more. She has authored and contributed to several books, including *Locker Room Diaries: The Naked Truth About Women*, *Body Image*, and *Re-Imagining the “Perfect” Body* and *Brave Girls: Raising Young Women with Passion and Purpose to Become Powerful Leaders*. Leslie also speaks at colleges and universities on the topics of body image, media literacy and female empowerment.
