Romantic Relationships Boost Breast Cancer Survivor Health

Women who feel more satisfied in their partnerships experience less stress and less inflammation.

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Positive, loving relationships can help people get through even the darkest and most challenging times in their lives, especially surviving cancer. Now a new study published in the journal Psychoneuroendocrinology has found that such relationships may boost not only emotional but physical health as well.

Being in a happy partnership lowers stress and inflammation in women who are breast cancer survivors, reports the Ohio State News.

For the study of 139 women with an average age of 55, participants were required to complete a self-report questionnaire and provide blood samples at three visits: upon recruitment (within one to three months of their cancer diagnosis) and during two follow-up visits six and 18 months after their treatment ended.

For one survey, women reported their degree of happiness, level of warmth and comfort they felt with their partner, how rewarding the relationship was and their overall satisfaction. The other survey evaluated the women's perceived psychological stress over the previous week.

The blood samples were used to analyze participants levels of four proteins known to promote inflammation, which can sometimes occur even when there isn't a need for an immune response and is associated with an increased risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. Elevated inflammation can also increase a survivor's risk for cancer recurrence.

Women who were more satisfied in their romantic relationships were more likely to report lower levels of perceived stress and inflammation, the researchers found. In addition, at times when women reported satisfaction with their romantic relationships, their inflammation markers were lower than at other times when they reported less satisfaction.

"The research shows the importance of fostering survivors' relationships," said Rosie Shrout, a postdoctoral scholar in the Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research at The Ohio State University and the study's lead author. "Some survivors might need help connecting with their partners

during a stressful time, so that means it's important for part of their screening and treatment to take the relationship into account and include a reference to couples counseling when appropriate."

Shrout also notes how important it is for survivors to feel comfortable with their partners and vice versa during difficult times like this. A close partnership not only improves a couple's bond but also has the power to boost a survivor's health.

But the moral of the study, researchers say, is that breast cancer survivors should seek out support in relationships in general. Whether it's a spouse, family member or friend, these relationships may help ease stress and improve health.

For related coverage, read "Lesley Manveille and Liam Neeson Stare Down Cancer in Ordinary Love' and "Spreading the Love: One Couple's Response to Inflammatory Breast Cancer."

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