

A satisfying romantic relationship may improve breast cancer survivors' health

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Breast cancer survivors in romantic relationships who feel happy and satisfied with their partners may be at lower risk for a host of health problems, new research suggests.

The findings suggest that the [relationship](#) itself wasn't the cure-all, however. Women who were satisfied in their relationships also reported lower [psychological stress](#)—and these two factors were associated with lower markers for [inflammation](#) in their blood.

Keeping inflammation at bay is the key to promoting health generally, and especially in breast [cancer](#) survivors, researchers say. When we're sick or injured, inflammation promotes healing. But elevated inflammation over time increases survivors' risk for cancer recurrence and other illnesses.

"It's important for survivors, when they're going through this uncertain time, to feel comfortable with their partners and feel cared for and understood, and also for their partners to feel comfortable and share their own concerns," said Rosie Shrout, lead

author of the study and a postdoctoral scholar in the Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research at The Ohio State University.

"Our findings suggest that this close partnership can boost their bond as a couple and also promote survivors' health even during a very stressful time, when they're dealing with cancer."

The research is published online in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*.

Shrout is a relationship scientist working in the lab of Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, professor of psychiatry and psychology and director of the Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research. For this work, Shrout conducted a secondary analysis of data from a previous Kiecolt-Glaser study assessing fatigue and immune function in breast cancer survivors.

The 139 women with an average age of 55 completed [self-report questionnaires](#) and provided [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 cancer treatment ended.

One survey assessed relationship satisfaction by asking the women to report their degree of happiness, the level of warmth and comfort they felt with their partner, how rewarding the relationship was and their overall satisfaction. The other questionnaire was used to evaluate their level of perceived psychological stress over the previous week.

Researchers analyzed the blood samples for levels of four proteins that promote inflammation throughout the body even when there is no need for an immune response. This kind of chronic inflammation is linked to numerous health problems, including [heart disease](#), Type 2 diabetes, arthritis and Alzheimer's disease, as well as the

frailty and functional decline that can accompany aging.

The findings showed a clear trend in the women as a group: The more satisfied they felt about their [romantic relationships](#), the lower their perceived stress and the lower their inflammation.

The design of the study allowed researchers to compare the group of women to each other and also gauge changes in each woman individually.

"This gave us a unique perspective—we found that when a woman was particularly satisfied with her relationship, she had lower stress and lower inflammation than usual—lower than her own average," Shroul said. "At a specific visit, if she was satisfied with her partner, her own inflammation was lower at that visit than at a different visit when she was less satisfied."

Shroul noted the study suggests that health professionals who care for [breast cancer patients](#) might want to keep an eye out for potential signs that their patients are struggling at home.

"The research shows the importance of fostering survivors' relationships. 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," she said. "Doing so could promote their health over the long run."

Though the findings in this study related to breast cancer survivors, Shroul said a strong romantic relationship would likely be helpful to people navigating the uncertainty associated with other serious illnesses by lowering their stress.

There are more sides to the relationship story: Previous work led by Kiecolt-Glaser, senior author of this study, has shown that marital conflict can have detrimental effects on health. And [breast cancer survivors](#) who are single may benefit from drawing on a network of family and friends for support.

"Some of the research would suggest it's better to be alone than in a troubled relationship," Kiecolt-Glaser said. "A good marriage offers good support, but the broader message for a breast cancer [survivor](#) who is not married is to seek support in other relationships.

"In general, one thing that happens when people are stressed is we tend to isolate ourselves, so seeking support when we're stressed is one of the more beneficial things that people can do."

More information: M. Rosie Shroul et al, Relationship satisfaction predicts lower stress and inflammation in breast cancer survivors: A longitudinal study of within-person and between-person effects, *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2020.104708](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2020.104708)

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