

Greenwich Sentinel



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Love is a Powerful Healer

By Julia Chiappetta

Love is in the air, as the saying goes, and I, for one, am feeling it. Love is a powerful healer that helps to promote and sustain wellness on so many levels. Spring fever abounds with tiny buds about to bloom and those that have already popped into flower.

As I ponder the effects of love, I realize that love can take pain away as easily as it can bring it on. You have surely heard the saying, “He/she died of a broken heart.”

Well... there is actually truth to this. It is called broken heart syndrome, or stress-induced cardiomyopathy. Women are more likely to experience it in the form of a sudden chest pain or surge of stress hormones brought on by emotional distress from the death of a loved one, a divorce, a breakup, betrayal or a romantic rejection. It could even happen with the shock of good news, like winning ten million dollars.

Unfortunately, it is often misdiagnosed as a heart attack because the symptoms mirror each other, and test results show changes in heart rhythm and blood patterns typical of a heart attack. But with broken heart syndrome, there are no blocked arteries;



the heart temporarily enlarges and doesn't pump as well. Researchers are just starting to learn how to diagnose and treat this condition.

On the other side of the coin, love can bring feelings of elation, peace, calm and joy, which are all benefits of wellness.

An article in The Huffington Post from 2014 reported that researchers from around the U.S. conducted several small studies examining the interactions between love and stress, and presented their findings at a meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Researchers looked at 34 couples who lived together and tested them for the stress hormone cortisol before, during and after being separated for four to seven days. Researchers found that when the couples were separated physically,

they had higher cortisol levels and worse sleep than when they were together. They also found that men are more likely to say “I love you” first.

Love does impact our bodies: we are wired for love and encouragement. It helps us manage stress, anxiety and depression, because dopamine, the brain's pleasure chemical, plays a role in both addictions and love. When we feel love or fall in love, dopamine is released, making us feel elated.

Dr. Harry Reis, co-editor of the Encyclopedia of Human Relationships told WebMD Health News' Sherry Rauh that while the research centers on marriage, the benefits of love may well extend to other close relationships—with a partner, a friend, a parent. He says, “The key is to feel connected to other people, feel respected and valued by other people, and feel a sense of belonging.” Rauh's article outlines ten ways that love and health are linked—each of them backed by research:

1. Fewer doctor's visits. According to a Health and Human Services Department review of studies on marriage and health, married people have fewer doctors' visits and shorter average hospital stays. One theory is that people in good relationships

take better care of themselves. For example, a spouse may keep you honest in your fitness routine and a best friend could motivate you to eat more organic fruits and vegetables, and over time, the good habits may mean fewer illnesses.

2. Less depression and substance abuse. The Health and Human Services report also says that getting married and staying married reduces depression in both men and women. Reis says this finding is not surprising, because social isolation is linked to higher rates of depression. Marriage also contributes to a decline in heavy drinking and drug abuse, especially among young adults.

3. Lower blood pressure. “A happy marriage is good for your blood pressure,” Rauh reports—this is the conclusion of a study in the Annals of Behavioral Medicine. Researchers found happily married people had the best blood pressure. Singles were next, and unhappily married participants had the worst blood pressure. This study reveals something important about the way that marriage affects health. It is the quality of a marriage, not the fact of being married, that matters.

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It's also worth stressing that singles with a strong social network did well in the blood pressure study, too.

4. Less anxiety. A loving, stable relationship is better than new romance for controlling anxiety. Researchers at the State University of New York at Stony Brook used functional MRI (fMRI) scans to examine the brains of people in love. In comparing passionate new couples with strongly connected long-term couples, both groups showed activation in a part of the brain associated with intense love. But parts of the brain associated with bonding were strongly activated in the long-term couples, while parts associated with anxiety were less activated in the long-term group.

5. Natural pain control. The fMRI study uncovered another big advantage for long-term couples—more activation in the part of the brain that keeps pain under control. A CDC report supports this finding. In a study of more than 127,000 adults, married people were less

likely to complain of headaches and back pain.

6. Better stress management. In addition to pain, love helps people cope with other kinds of stress. If you're facing a stressor and you've got the support of someone who loves you, you can deal with it better. "If you lose your job, for example," Rauh reports, "it helps emotionally and financially if a partner is there to support you."

7. Fewer colds. Loving relationships can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression—and these can translate into a boost for the immune system. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that people with positive emotions are less likely to get sick after exposure to cold or flu viruses. The study in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* compared people who showed happy and calm disposition with those who appeared anxious, hostile, or depressed.

8. Faster healing. "The power of a positive relationship may make flesh wounds heal faster," Rauh reports. Researchers

at Ohio State University Medical Center inflicted married couples with blister wounds. The wounds healed nearly twice as fast in spouses who behaved warmly compared with those who showed a lot of hostility toward each other. The study was published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

9. Longer life. Research indicates that married people live longer. One large study looked at the effect of marriage on mortality during an eight-year period in the 1990s. Using data from the National Health Interview Survey, researchers found that people who had never been married were 58 percent more likely to die than married people.

10. Happier life. One of love's greatest benefits is joy. We may know this from experience, but research is just beginning to demonstrate how strong the link between love relationships and happiness can be. A study in the *Journal of Family Psychology* shows that happiness depends more on the quality of

relationships than on the level of income. "And so we have scientific evidence that, at least in some ways, the power of love trumps the power of money," writes Rauh.

So, love is a powerful player when it comes to our hearts and minds. The Bible has a lot to say about love, too. Here are a few of my favorite passages: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love one another. As I have loved you." "Now, faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

As we look around at the beauty in each day, let's try to show and receive love abundantly and take in the joy and peace that it brings, and combine that with a nice healthy green drink, full of nutrients and superfoods, a hike in the sunshine, and giving unselfishly to benefit someone else. Love is the air, and with it there is life to live!

Julia Chiappetta is the author of "Breast Cancer: The Notebook" (Gemini Media, 2006) and is also the owner of Julia Chiappetta Consulting. She lives in Cos Cob. More information and past columns can be found at JuliaChiappetta.com.

