

# Can thinking of a loved one reduce your pain?

November 13 2009, By Stuart Wolpert

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Naomi Eisenberger

(PhysOrg.com) -- *"The very thought of you ... the mere idea of you"* -- from the song "The Very Thought of You" by Ray Noble. Can the mere thought of your loved one reduce your pain?

Yes, according to a new study by UCLA [psychologists](#) that underscores the importance of [social relationships](#) and staying socially connected.

The study, which asked whether simply looking at a photograph of your significant other can reduce pain, involved 25 women, mostly UCLA students, who had boyfriends with whom they had been in a good

relationship for more than six months.

The women received moderately painful heat stimuli to their forearms while they went through a number of different conditions. In one set of conditions, they viewed photographs of their boyfriend, a stranger and a chair.

"When the women were just looking at pictures of their partner, they actually reported less pain to the heat stimuli than when they were looking at pictures of an object or pictures of a stranger," said study co-author Naomi Eisenberger, assistant professor of psychology and director of UCLA's Social and Affective [Neuroscience](#) Laboratory. "Thus, the mere reminder of one's partner through a simple photograph was capable of reducing pain."

"This changes our notion of how [social support](#) influences people," she added. "Typically, we think that in order for social support to make us feel good, it has to be the kind of support that is very responsive to our emotional needs. Here, however, we are seeing that just a photo of one's significant other can have the same effect."

In another set of conditions, each woman held the hand of her boyfriend, the hand of a male stranger and a squeeze ball. The study found that when women were holding their boyfriends' hands, they reported less physical [pain](#) than when they were holding a stranger's hand or a ball while receiving the same amount of heat stimulation.

"This study demonstrates how much of an impact our social ties can have on our experience and fits with other work emphasizing the importance of social support for physical and mental health," Eisenberger said.

One practical piece of advice the authors give is that the next time you

are going through a stressful or painful experience, if you cannot bring a loved one with you, a photo may do.

The study appears in the November 2009 issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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