

Letting go can boost quality of life

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Most people go through life setting goals for themselves. But what happens when a life-altering experience makes those goals become unachievable or even unhealthy?

A new collaborative study published in *Psycho-Oncology* by Carsten Wrosch of Concordia University's Department of Psychology and Centre for Research in Human Development and Catherine Sabiston of McGill's Department of [Kinesiology](#) and [Physical Education](#) and the [Health Behaviour](#) and Emotion Lab found that [breast cancer](#) survivors who were able to let go of old goals and set new ones showed an improved well-being overall. Once the self-imposed pressure of now unrealistic goals was removed, individuals' quality of life improved, as did their level of physical activity.

Wrosch and Sabiston were interested in looking at how to encourage breast cancer survivors to become more active. Statistics show that as many as 48 per cent of breast cancer survivors are overweight or obese. They also tend to be more sedentary than women who have not been diagnosed with breast cancer.

The researchers studied 176 breast cancer survivors between the ages of 28 and 79, who were, on average, approximately 11 months past their diagnosis and close to three months post treatment. Self-reports of the individual's capacity to adjust their goals were measured at the start of the study. At the same time, researchers also measured self-reports of physical activity, sedentary activity, emotional well-being, and daily physical symptoms such as [nausea](#) and pain.

Three months later, they took a look at another round of self-reports. The study found that goal reengagement (being able to set new goals) was associated with more physical activity, increased emotional well-being and fewer physical symptoms. In addition, breast cancer survivors who were able to let go of old goals and to find new ones were less sedentary, which contributed to an improved well-being. These findings support earlier research showing that goal adjustment can influence better well-being and health.

"By engaging in new goals a person can reduce the distress that arises from the desire to attain the unattainable, while continuing to derive a sense of purpose in life by finding other pursuits of value," says Wrosch. "Abandoning old goals allows someone to invest sufficient time and energy in effectively addressing their new realities."

Recent guidelines have suggested that breast [cancer survivors](#) should engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity every week to gain health benefits. "It is safe, feasible and effective for enhancing well-being and health among [breast cancer survivors](#)," notes Sabiston. "Unfortunately, few survivors are engaging in the recommended levels of activity."

"Our research reveals that the capacity to adjust goals plays a pivotal role in facilitating not only high [physical activity](#) but also low [sedentary activity](#) and thereby contributing to overall improved well-being," says Wrosch. "Given that it is possible to influence adjustment to specific goals; it may be beneficial to integrate goal adjustment processes into clinical practice."

More information: Cited study:
onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pon.3037/full

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