

Bad feelings can motivate cancer patients

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Feeling down is a common side effect of being diagnosed with cancer. Anxiety, guilt, and distress often come hand-in-hand with diagnosis and treatment.

But a recent study by researchers from Concordia and the University of Toronto shows that these seemingly negative emotions can actually be good for patients.

Andrée Castonguay, the study's lead author and a postdoctoral researcher in Concordia's Faculty of Arts and Science, says feelings of anger or guilt can inspire people to set new goals and engage in more moderate-to-vigorous exercise.

"That helps counteract the boost in the [stress hormone cortisol](#), which those emotions also cause, and which can negatively disrupt the way the body functions," she adds.

The research, published in the journal *Health Psychology*, looked at recently diagnosed and treated [breast cancer patients](#).

For the study, Castonguay and her co-authors, Concordia psychology professor Carsten Wrosch and University of Toronto kinesiology professor Catherine Sabiston, had 145 breast cancer survivors fill out a questionnaire to assess their emotions, capacity to engage in new goals and level of [physical activity](#).

The researchers also analyzed cortisol levels using saliva samples

provided five times over the course of a year by the participants.

The team then conducted detailed analyses using a modelling technique that helped them predict the relationship between the women's negative feelings, commitment to new goals, physical activity and [cortisol levels](#) over time.

They found that participants' capacity for setting new goals, like starting to go for brisk walks, facilitated the beneficial effect of negative emotions on physical activity and prevented the adverse effects of increased cortisol, which can result in a host of health problems, including a weakened immune system.

"Our results underscore the complexity of the link between emotions and health," explains Wrosch, who is also a member of the Centre for Research in Human Development.

"Although negative emotions have a bad reputation and have been linked to disease, they are also 'designed' to produce adaptive behaviours."

In particular, he adds, emotions like guilt or anxiety may motivate people to change their health-compromising behaviours and engage in more exercise. "This may be particularly important among certain cancer survivors, since inactivity, weight problems or obesity can be common risk factors."

Castonguay says that, although recent guidelines encourage [breast cancer survivors](#) to engage in healthy lifestyle behaviours, few survivors actually engage in the recommended levels.

"This includes 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week to reduce the risk of developing further health problems related to immune function, weight management and quality of life."

Based on their findings, the researchers conclude that certain [negative emotions](#) can play an important role in directing adaptive health behaviours among some cancer survivors and can contribute to long-term benefits on their physical health.

"The capacity to commit to and engage in new goals is an important resource for helping survivors meet activity recommendations and minimize the negative impact of bad moods on their biological functioning," Castonguay says.

She hopes that the study will encourage clinicians to identify [cancer survivors](#) who have difficulty selecting and committing to new goals, and to work with them to help them follow through.

More information: The roles of negative affect and goal adjustment capacities in breast cancer survivors: Associations with physical activity and diurnal cortisol secretion.

psycnet.apa.org/journals/hea/36/4/320.html

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