

Dragons of hope: Boat racing improves lives of breast cancer survivors

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The best long-term therapy for breast cancer survivors might have nothing to do with doctors or self-help books, a health researcher at McGill University says. Her prescription? Dragon boat racing.

Breast cancer survivors who participated in dragon boat racing reported significantly improved physical and mental health and coped better with post-recovery trauma, according to a study conducted by Dr. Catherine Sabiston of McGill's Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education. The results of her research -- conducted in Vancouver while she was a PhD student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) -- were published in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* at the end of 2007.

"For these women, the diagnosis and treatment of cancer were devastating," Dr. Sabiston said. "There was a huge amount of stress, which continued with the treatment and the worry of recurrence. They live every day with the worry 'Could this be the day my cancer comes back?'"

With the encouragement of Dr. Sabiston's UBC colleague Dr. Don McKenzie, a number of dragon boat teams made up of breast cancer patients of varying ages and backgrounds were formed in Vancouver in the late 1990s. They continue to compete and participated in Montreal's dragon boat event last summer.

Dragon boat racing is an ancient Chinese sport dating back to the 4th century BCE. The boats are long, narrow, canoe-like craft, crewed by teams of anywhere from 10 to 20 paddlers, plus a drummer at the bow and a tiller (or steerer) at the stern. Once restricted to China and to Chinese expatriate communities, over the last quarter-century the sport has become increasingly popular worldwide, particularly on Canada's west coast.

"Up until about ten years ago, it was commonly believed that if you had breast cancer, you

shouldn't be physically active, and you certainly shouldn't do upper body physical activity," Dr. Sabiston said. "Dr. McKenzie changed the medical thinking in that regard."

For her part, Dr. Sabiston's study followed 20 dragon boaters with varying levels of experience to address a paucity of qualitative data in the field.

"Most of the previous literature on exercise and breast cancer has been from a quantitative assessment of physiological benefits," she said. "There wasn't anything that looked at how these women actually perceive exercise. We were trying to figure out whether having an environment where all these women exercised together enhanced or dispelled the myths around body image. We also wanted to look at how social support played a role in their recovery."

Dr. Sabiston's results, based on in-person interviews, demonstrated the positive benefits of the activity. "Positive psychological growth following this traumatic event was extremely clear in these findings," she said. "The physical activity itself and the women the participants met acted as a sort of buffer to the enduring stresses of cancer recovery. They started to live their lives like athletes. It was extremely empowering."

Interestingly, the positive results appeared to be dependent on a shared sense of what Dr. Sabiston termed "similar otherness." While the breast cancer survivors perceived each other as similar despite considerable differences in age, body type and fitness levels, a similar intervention with overweight women did not produce the same effect.

"With the breast cancer survivors, if you survived the disease, you were part of the group," she said. "Whereas the overweight women -- like other groups -- started to compare and contrast themselves to one another. They simply did not perceive themselves as 'similar others.'"

Source: McGill University

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