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## Study seeks best way to de-stress breast cancer survivors

CALGARY – An Alberta research team is measuring how breast cancer survivors respond, physically and emotionally, to three different stress-reduction programs.

“If we can determine certain types of people respond well to one form of support, then we can use that information to guide future patients to that optimal form of support,” says study co-investigator Dr. Michael Speca, a clinical psychologist within the Department of Psychosocial Resources at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre and adjunct associate professor at the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Medicine.

First, participants meet with the researchers to fill out questionnaires and provide blood and saliva samples. This information tells the researchers about the participant’s personality type, coping style and current stress levels.

Then the participant is randomly assigned into one of three stress-reduction programs offered by the Department of Psychosocial Resources at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre: a one-day seminar for improving coping and problem-solving skills; an eight-week mindfulness program that teaches yoga and meditation; or a 12-week group therapy program in which breast cancer survivors compare experiences and share coping skills. Researchers investigate the effects of these programs on stress hormone production and immune function.

Approximately 2,000 women in Alberta are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Offering stress-reduction programs is a vital part of cancer care. Dr. Speca says about 35 per cent of breast cancer survivors experience some form of emotional distress that, if left untreated, can persist for years, hindering their recovery and diminishing their quality of life.

“Feelings of vulnerability and mortality, and the realization this potentially terminal illness could come back, can be quite difficult to accept for many women,” says Dr. Speca.

Study participant Lynne Kenney, 71, admits she had many “black days” following a right breast mastectomy and chemotherapy. She completed the mindfulness program last year and, through regular meditation and yoga, is now living “a more relaxed and much happier day-to-day life.”

Nearly 110 breast cancer survivors have participated in the study to date and researchers are accepting new participants until the end of August. Women who have completed chemotherapy, radiation or surgical treatment for non-metastatic breast cancer may be eligible.

The four-year study is funded by the Canadian Breast Cancer Research Alliance. Women who do not qualify for the study are still welcome to participate in these programs, or other programs offered by the Department of Psychosocial Resources.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.7 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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