

SELFLESS SORTS

Volunteering, giving back might be keys to long life.

BY ALAN CROWELL

When Melody Joliat isn't at work on her accelerated master's degree in social work, she can often be found volunteering at Eastern Maine Medical Center.

It is part of a promise the 76-year-old made when she didn't think she was going to survive cancer.

"It was a terrible time for me, but I said if I get through it, I am going to give back all of the love that was given to me," said Joliat.

Well past retirement age, Joliat seems much younger than her years, which may be partly due to the fact that she swims a mile most days, walks five miles with her husband after dinner, and does yoga before bed.

But while her exercise regime would be impressive at any age, according to a body of research that is now over a half-century old, the social connections and sense of purpose that Joliat fosters through volunteering and her master's program may be just as important to her health and wellbeing.

A study carried out by Harvard researchers in 1965 found that men and women who did not have strong social connections were more than twice as likely to die over a nine-year period as those who had strong social and community ties.

Many subsequent studies found similar results. Among the health problems that get worse with loneliness are depression, anxiety, dementia, and cardiovascular disease.

That body of research helped prompt the United Kingdom to create a "ministry of loneliness" earlier this year to foster better social ties among groups that are suffering social isolation, such as elderly people who have lost their partners.

Dr. Cosmina Fachiol, an Eastern Maine Medical Center geriatrician, said that for many people, the problem of losing social connections begins when they retire and lose contact with their work family.

Loss of a partner can compound that isolation.

Volunteering not only helps people by increasing social contact, it is also associated with a greater sense of purpose.

People with a greater sense of purpose have a lower chance of developing Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia, said Fachiol. And even when people who feel they have meaning in their life do have Alzheimer's disease, they don't show as many symptoms as people with Alzheimer's who do not have a sense of meaning.

Brain scans of people who are performing altruistic behavior (behavior that helps others) also indicate that doing acts of kindness boosts circuits in the brain that help combat apathy and depression.

Fachiol said that when she talks to patients who are concerned about their health, they are sometimes surprised by the importance she places on social contacts and activities like volunteering.

Often, people who are concerned about their cognitive health are involved with activities like crossword puzzles and online programs designed to stimulate mental activity.

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Others put their faith in supplements. One woman was taking so many supplements that she was losing weight.

While crossword puzzles and brain stimulating activities are certainly not harmful, Fachiol said that from a medical point of view there is little in the way of data that proves their effectiveness when it comes to fending off Alzheimer's.

Instead of spending thousands of dollars on supplements or doing a dozen crossword puzzles every day, Fachiol tells her patients to look for ways to spend more time with people in meaningful ways.

"Go to church if you haven't gone in a while. Have lunch with a friend. Do whatever you find meaningful. Take your grandchild to a movie," said Dr. Fachiol.



Eastern Maine Medical Center volunteer Melody Joliat (on right) with EMMC Staff Nurse Kelly Hiller. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Volunteering and giving back to her community has been a way of life for Joliat, whether it was serving as cub scout leader when she was a young mother or spending time with seriously ill patients today.

After finishing chemotherapy in November of 2011, it was only a matter of months before she was back at EMMC filling out paperwork to become a volunteer.

fulfill a life-long dream of earning her degree. It was a dream that had been deferred, first to raise a family and follow her husband's military career, and then a second time when she was diagnosed with cancer.

Characteristically, Joliat hopes to use her degree to help others, just as the nurses at EMMC helped her.

"They just gave me a lot of hope and that is what brought me into social work... because I just love trying to help people and nurture people."

Joliat graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Maine with a bachelor's degree in social work in May. She began the accelerated Master of Social Work program the very next day.

When she finishes the accelerated program, Joliat hopes to become a clinical social worker with an agency or hospital.

"There are a lot of hurt people out there in this community. I would like to be able to make a difference in somebody's life, to give them some hope."

At 76, she worries that she might not be as marketable as someone younger, but she hopes her experience will help balance the scales.

"I have a better understanding of who I am and what life is about," she said.

Life is not about getting a six-figure job, or wearing designer clothes, and it is not lived through screens and social media. There are a lot of obstacles to overcome in life but at its bottom, life is caring for the people around you, she said.

"It is about giving love and receiving love in a genuine way, without an agenda attached," she said.

These days she brings lunch to oncology patients and if they seem discouraged, she sometimes shares her own story.

She also volunteers with palliative care patients, spending time with patients who have serious and often incurable illnesses.

Sometimes those patients are not able to speak or respond, but Joliat will hold their hand, read a poem or simply spend time with them so that they are not alone.

Every day is a gift, one to be filled with purpose, she says.

"Every day when I get up I look out the window and up at the sky ... and I say 'OK God, where are you going to send me. Send me out there and I am going to do it.'"

Surviving cancer also meant a chance to