

Purdue Study Follows Breast Cancer Survivors

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A Purdue University professor is studying a group of Indianapolis women who wear pink proudly—an outward display of their pride after beating breast cancer. Meghan McDonough, assistant professor of sport and exercise psychology, is carefully tracking these women, who are called a "special population" in scientific study terms. However, what makes this team of women special is not only that they've beat the odds, but that they've formed the first-ever dragon boat racing team in Indiana.

"[This study] allows us a time sensitive window to follow a team that is newly beginning to see those changes as they happen, as opposed to retrospectively," says McDonough. "It was just a wonderful coincidence and opportunity that when I came to Purdue, there was a team starting up in Indianapolis where there'd never been a team before."

Breast cancer survivors forming dragon boat racing teams is somewhat of a recent phenomenon. The "Indy SurviveOars" is the 50th team in the United States. The popularity of breast cancer survivors competing in dragon boat racing surged in the 1990s, when a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia encouraged a group of survivors to form a team.

McDonough has completed other studies by following dragon boat racing teams in Canada. She discovered members on the teams of breast cancer survivors experienced positive psychological outcomes and increased quality of life in areas such as social support and stress management.

"Rather than looking at the typical exerciser or typical athlete, there's increased focus [in the exercise psychology field] on unique ways sport and exercise psychology play out in unique populations like this," says McDonough. [Listen](#)

McDonough's previous studies with dragon boat racing teams were all retrospective. This is the first study to follow a team of breast cancer survivors from the very beginning.

"Going through the experience of diagnosis and treatment has long been considered a difficult process to go through, and one in which people need support from the medical community, family and friends," says McDonough. "But there are also studies that have shown some significant challenges and stressors exist and persist long into survivorship for some people." [Listen](#)

The Indy SurviveOars formed their team just a few months ago. The paddlers vary in age from about 30 to 85, but they all have one thing in common: they beat breast cancer. It's a bond that's already causing team members to report the positive effects of participating. They say the feeling of unity is hard to describe to anyone who—well, has never been in the same boat.

"It's a support system to me," says 85 year-old Annabell Barnes, the oldest paddler on Indy SurviveOars. "It gives you hope because so many people don't have anyone to talk to who have been through the same situation you've been through." [Listen](#)

McDonough plans to follow the team throughout its entire first season, which will likely end this autumn. So far, team members have completed baseline interviews and initial questionnaires. This information will be used to measure any psychological, social and quality of life changes the women may experience in the future. McDonough anticipates friendships and emotional connections will cause the women to report positive changes. [Listen](#)

Lisa Lee Heiden Peters, president of Indy SurviveOars, says relationships are just starting to bud between the women. The dragon boat team spent early winter and spring practicing on the edge of a pool instead of inside their boat. She says the first time the team headed outdoors and put the boat in a body of natural water was evidence of bonds that have already formed between team members.

"It was bad weather and rainy, but we wanted to go out anyway," says Peters, speaking through her tears. "It was so emotional for us to finally be in the water together."

In addition to the feeling of unity, some paddlers already sense an increase in their overall quality of life.

"Life is just much better," says Barnes. "I feel better, I'm more uplifted. I have something to look forward to doing." [Listen](#)

After McDonough has analyzed the results and completed her study, she hopes it will be published in academic journals. More importantly, she hopes the study is passed along to people who are interested in similar programs, so other teams can form, and even more women can benefit.

"I am really blessed to be with this team," says Barnes. "Everybody is so nice and so friendly and so helpful. I feel like it's a bond we have, and I'm so blessed to be a part of it." [Listen](#)

For more information, visit the [Indy SurviveOars website](#).

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