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Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## Pain Relief Through Photography

By [RONI CARYN RABIN](#)

Can looking at the photograph of a loved one make pain go away?

Numerous studies show that strong social connections have benefits for health. People who have active social lives seem to live longer than those who are isolated, and married cancer patients have a better outlook than divorced cancer patients. Now, [a study](#) [pdf] suggests that merely looking at a photograph of a loved one can relieve the sensation of physical pain.

Psychologists at the University of California, Los Angeles, recruited 25 women who had steady boyfriends. Using a tool that applied heat to the women's forearms, they turned up the temperature until it was slightly uncomfortable and asked the women to rate the pain they experienced on a scale of one to 20.

The researchers manipulated the heat and recorded the women's reactions under different conditions: while she was looking at a photo of her boyfriend, or a photo of a complete stranger and a chair. They also had the women rate the pain while they held the hand of a stranger hidden behind a curtain, and as they held their boyfriend's hand or a squeeze ball.

"We saw lower pain ratings on average when the women were holding their partner's hand compared with a stranger's hand or an object," said [Sarah L. Master](#), the lead author of the paper, who did the study at U.C.L.A. as part of her doctoral research.

When the women looked at photographs of their boyfriends, they rated the pain lower than when they were staring at a photo of a stranger or a chair. Surprisingly, they even ranked the pain lower than they had while holding their boyfriend's hand.

"It's interesting that a physical sensation can actually become more manageable by just looking at a photo of someone you find supportive," Dr. Master said. The study appeared in the November issue of the journal [Psychological Science](#).

Under certain circumstances, Dr. Master suggested, looking at a photo may have an even stronger effect than having the person physically present. "Having the actual person there might not be a good thing if the person is in a bad mood or not being supportive at that

moment. A picture could be a better solution,” she said.

Dr. Master said the mere reminder of the loved one may engender feelings of support, possibly by prompting the release of endogenous opioids, chemicals in the brain that have pain relief effects.

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