

Love is not all we need, but it's what counts most

By Ruth Ostrow

WHAT'S love got to do with overall health? A huge amount, if scientists and medical experts at the International Conference on Healthy Ageing and Longevity in Brisbane, at which I spoke last month, are to be believed.

Alongside lectures examining increased longevity through drugs, diet, and medicines, there was a whole session devoted to spirituality, happiness, love and sex as a way to promote healthy ageing – largely because conference organisers agree that the human heart and soul are hugely important in keeping us juicy and giving us the impetus to live.

For instance, at a session of centenarians some of the oldest people in the world came on stage to talk about themselves. What emerged was that other than good diets and lives spent exercising, those who lived to ripe old ages often had a lot of love around from children and grandchildren or from the community at large.

Marc Cohen, founding professor of complementary medicine at RMIT university, told us that a 2002 National Heart Foundation study showed social isolation and lack of group support were as significant among people with heart disease as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and smoking.

He was widely quoted in the media last week as saying: "There's a growing research base that suggests that the more we experience love in our life the longer we will live and the more protected we are against a whole lot of degenerative diseases. Whether it's another person, or loving an activity or a piece of art or nature, love is all about connecting."

Cohen chaired my session on the importance of sex in healthy living. He meanwhile emphasised love in his talk – pointing to a 1970s US study which found that rabbits cuddled by their laboratory assistants lived 60 per cent longer than those that weren't, even when both were fed the same high-fat diets.

He pointed to a study of 1000 Israeli men with heart conditions which showed the profound significance of love in their healing. "The men who felt that they were loved by their wives had a 50 per cent reduction in their angina and cardiac disease," he said.

He told us that love also accounted for the fact that women generally lived longer than men and made up 85 per cent of the world's centenarians. "Women are working with children who need love, their major work is to love," he said.

Following on from his beautiful words I quoted sexuality expert Rosie King who talks about something she calls skin hunger – which is a form of hunger as potent as any other appetite. It is the need to be held, touched, kissed and loved. Sex, she says, is one way to give ourselves this important nourishment.

For one thing, the chemicals released during sex aid a healthy life. Over my years as a sex and relationships writer and broadcaster I received thousands of letters and calls. I also did countless interviews. I discovered that those who stayed sexually active into their 60s, 70s, and 80s seemed happier and healthier – reporting greater stamina, skin and muscle tone, and increased wellbeing. Taoist wisdom, eastern philosophy, and hard scientific evidence back up my empirical observations.

Ancient eastern texts refer to the existence of a little-known substance called amrita, or the elixir of youth, which is produced during states of high arousal, and which in turn nourishes the body, increases blood flow to the skin, and keeps the internal organs lubricated and supple. Pleasure – in all its forms – can keep us ripe.

Famous Ayurvedic professor Robert Svoboda talks of ojas – the intelligent fluid running through the body – which can be increased during certain sex practices. I was privileged to attend his lectures when he was last in Australia.

Meanwhile, in Western medicine, prominent anthropologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Helen Fisher, who wrote *Anatomy of Love*, talks of amphetamines and opiates being released through sex. She particularly refers to opiates such as the cuddle chemical oxytocin, which kick in to keep us in long-term pair-bonds after the first rush of love wears off. Many of the chemicals of love we release are euphorics and nature's painkillers, leading us to a deep sense of contentment and wellbeing which aids overall health.

"Love is a natural high," observed Anthony Walsh, author of the book *The Science of Love: Understanding Love and its Effects on Mind and Body*.

One scientist at the conference shared with us that experiments on rats showed that sex actually increased neurons in the brain, which is one very good reason to do it – often.

Cohen agreed that love and sex are wonderful panaceas to ageing. But he points out that the bias shouldn't just be on human-to-human love. He says that caring for and patting pets helps protect the heart. Deep meditation and spiritual experiences slow the metabolism and increase longevity. Finding an activity we feel passionate about gives us a sense of joy and purpose.

As we already suspected: love in all its forms makes the world go around!

www.ruthostrow.com

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