

IS THE PINK RIBBON A BAD IDEA: MAYBE¹

Emily Main[©]

As National Breast Cancer Awareness Month comes to a close, it's likely you've seen more than a few pink ribbons, pink yogurt lids, pink football paraphernalia, and pink household appliances. Such "cause marketing" has ballooned over the past few decades, in an attempt to raise awareness for breast cancer and to support women who have dealt with the disease.

But are all those pink ribbons doing any good? In a new book, *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health*, medical sociologist Gayle Sulik, PhD, argues that it isn't, and could be working against efforts to find what causes the disease, considering that breast cancer rates continue to rise despite the billions poured into pink ribbon campaigns. "Survivors and supporters walk, run, and purchase for a cure as incidence rates rise, the cancer industry thrives, corporations claim responsible citizenship while profiting from the disease, and breast cancer is re-stigmatized for those who question or deny the pink-ribbon model," she writes. Gayle Sulik spoke with Rodale.com about her new book and how you can still support breast cancer without succumbing to marketing hype.

Rodale.com: What do you think is the biggest problem with the idea of the pink ribbon?

Gayle Sulik: I think there are two problems. One is that it has created visibility around the cause of breast cancer but it has been a distraction to the realities of breast cancer, where the progress has been and where progress is lacking. It's moved the disease to a superficial level. The other is that there is a major industry involved with this, both inside and outside the medical fields. When we're creating major revenues from breast cancer, where is the incentive to stop the disease? And it also excludes the diverse experiences that people with the disease have—it creates this "feel-good" idea, and people who are diagnosed may or may not feel that way.

Rodale.com: You talk a lot about those diverse experiences in your book. Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

Sulik: There's a lot of optimism behind the pink ribbon, the idea that breast cancer is not that big of a deal. You get diagnosed, get treated, you get cured, you feel better, and all while keeping a smile on your face. And we who want to support you can buy pink stuff and feel good about that. When you talk to women at different stages of the disease, though, you'll find that it's easier to be triumphant if you have a stage 0 [the earliest stage of the disease] than if you have stage 3 [the stage at which the cancer tumors get larger and have moved to the lymph nodes]. I've read in blogs and in resources for people in later stages of the disease that they feel left out. Nobody wants to hear from them; their story is not positive and there's no place for them in this discourse.

¹ Rodale News, October 28, 2010

Rodale.com: Do you think this pink ribbon culture is more harmful to individuals or to the progress of finding causes?

Sulik: As a sociologist, I'm going to look at the big bird's-eye view. What is this really doing for the overall end in mind, which is eradication? And I do think, from all my research, that it's undermining our capacity to achieve that goal, partly because of the distraction—the most important thing is buy pink and raise money. There's a BMW campaign out that says something like "How far would you drive to prevent breast cancer?" It creates this idea that all we need to do is raise money by any means necessary.

Rodale.com: Where do you think efforts should be focused?

Sulik: Right now, the biggest area that needs to be addressed is the environmental links to breast cancer. There's already a lot of focus on behaviors that influence risk factors—eat right, exercise, limit alcohol intake—but only 30 percent of all breast cancer cases are found in people who have these known risk factors. So, for 70 percent of the cases, we don't know what causes it. That creates this false impression that by doing certain things, you'll prevent breast cancer. But in 70 percent of cases, there's a lot of evidence that the environment is having a lot of influence.

Rodale.com: Do you think that leads to this whole idea of "pinkwashing"?

Sulik: Yes. But I see two versions of that. There's "pinking," using the ribbon to increase revenues and make money, and "pinkwashing" which is doing that and producing products that may directly or indirectly contribute to the disease. Petroleum-based products are a big problem, so why should we support the auto industry to promote a cure? And I see it hugely with cosmetics. I don't want to pinpoint Estée Lauder, but the Lauder foundation [The Breast Cancer Research Foundation] is a major foundation. So if there are chemicals in those cosmetics that are linked to breast cancer—and there probably are, according to the Breast Cancer Fund—should they be promoting the idea of the pink ribbon?

Rodale.com: So after doing all this research, do you think there's a place for the pink ribbon at all?

Sulik: It does play a role. Especially in the earlier part of the movement, there needed to be a symbol that people could organize around, and the ribbon itself has been a way to mobilize people. But we need to think about who it represents and if it's moving people to take the actions necessary to affect the system. It's the system that's flawed, not the ribbon.

The pink ribbon culture is arranged like spokes on a wheel. It involves advertising, pop culture, industry, mass media, and women who are diagnosed. Right now, the way all those things come together supports one way of coping [with a diagnosis] and promotes the idea that the way we solve this is by throwing money at it. But is any money good money? And where do we draw the line? There's about \$6 billion a year raised through [breast cancer] cause marketing, and we need to know where that money goes—and where that money comes from, which involves the pinkwashing issue. Without greater accountability, we can raise that amount of money every year, and not get any closer to eradicating the disease.

Rodale.com: What do you recommend that people do if they want to continue supporting breast cancer awareness without succumbing to marketing or "pinkwashing"?

Sulik: The first step is just to notice. There's so much pink around that it all tends to fall into the background. There's a pistol that has money going to breast cancer. There's a pink vibrator on eBay. When you see this stuff, make some decisions ethically for yourself. Is this how you want to support breast cancer?

People also need to research the organizations behind these products. I do align with Breast Cancer Action's "Think Before You Pink" campaign (thinkbeforeyoupink.org), and they have a list of questions to ask. We don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but you need to be asking, is your money having the effect that you want it to have?