



Hip, knee replacements heal beyond the patient

Study examines quality of life improvements for spouses, loved ones



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Early in their marriage, Jona Miller of Mt. Oliver watched her husband Steve get a tooth pulled without anesthesia. And then there was the nail gun incident: “He shot a framing nail through his finger, and he was the one standing there going, ‘I think we need to go to the hospital.’”

But five years ago, while vacationing at a South Carolina beach, Steve Miller couldn’t even bear to walk to the water with his wife of more than 40 years. The pain in his hips was excruciating.

“He just could not do it. He was in agony. And that was, I guess, my wake-up call,” she said. “Because this is the guy who never says he can’t do something, right? He always bullheaded finds a way to do it, pushes through it.”

Now on the other side of a hip replacement surgery, it’s not just Steve who feels better: As Jona knows well, the aftereffects of joint replacement surgery reach far beyond the patient. And a [new study](#) backs that up: Presented at the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons’ annual meeting in March, it found that spouses experience a significant boost in quality of life after their partners undergo hip and knee arthroplasty.



An X-ray of Steve Miller's reconstructed hip joints that will allow him to dance with his wife, Jona, at their son's wedding on May 18.
(Courtesy of Steve Miller)

“For surgeons, this study is an important piece of information they can use to counsel their patients and their spouses on what to expect after [surgery],” said the study’s lead author Nicolas Jozefowski, in a [press release](#).

While quality of life improvements for post-surgical patients are well documented, he said, “now we know it will also improve for spouses. Most spouses assume a caregiving role when their partner has joint replacement surgery and they are sacrificing a bit in terms of their quality of life, but we can show it will improve with these data.”

While the spotlight is so often trained on the patient, spouses frequently have been suffering in silence. They take on extra responsibilities at home, find themselves putting aside dreams of traveling and shared activities during retirement, and endure the emotional toll of watching a partner live in pain.

“I had been gradually taking over everything,” Jona Miller remembered. “Taking care of all the grocery shopping, carrying everything in the house. Mowing. He couldn’t take the trash out anymore because of the steps, the laundry. It was on me to carry everything down and up.”

Steve Miller said the pain of watching his wife shoulder more than her share during the years leading up to his hip replacement surgeries was worse than the physical pain that dogged him daily.

“It was embarrassing,” he said. “I even talked to a therapist about being pathetic.”

That crushing guilt and unyielding pain finally began to diminish when the couple — together since she was a senior at Baldwin High School and he attended West Liberty University in West Virginia — met with Todd Balog, the clinical director of Total Joint Replacement at St. Clair Health in Mt. Lebanon and a physician at St. Clair Medical Group Orthopedic Surgery.

Balog discovered that arthritis had eaten away much of Miller’s hip joints. Physical therapy would be no help and replacement of both joints was the only real option.

“Pain has a different impact on everybody,” Balog said. “And some patients, it’s just a matter of they can’t walk as far as they want to walk. ... But other people, the pain just has this huge impact on their overall mood, their quality of life, how they interact with other people. Sometimes they’ll get angry easier. Pain affects everybody differently. So I think, no doubt, if you can get rid of the pain a lot of times, the mental health will improve as well.”

And that type of healing spreads ripple effects to spouses, children and beyond, he said.

At the first post-op visit, “Steve got up, and he was in tears, and he grabbed Dr. Balog in a hug,” Jona Miller remembered. “He said, ‘Look at me. I can get up out of the chair.’ And then I got up out of my chair, and I threw my arms around [Dr. Balog], and I was in tears too, and I said, ‘Thank you for giving me my guy back.’”

She smiled through tears as she described looking forward to dancing with her husband at the wedding of their middle son, Jake Miller, who’s getting married May 18.

Relief, 10 years in the making

Jan Sumner, a retired second grade teacher at Neshannock School District, underwent her first knee replacement — the right side — 10 years ago. A second knee replacement — this time on the left — followed about three years ago. But pain relief remained elusive. The right knee had never quite healed correctly, and over time it became a source of never-ending torment. Standing for long periods was unbearable. Walking was nearly as bad.



Jan and Randy Sumner of Neshannock will celebrate 45 years of marriage this summer with a trip to Glacier National Park in Montana. Jan is just four months out from knee replacement surgery, which she credits with giving her, her life back. "We're too young for [Randy] to be my caretaker," she said.
(Courtesy of Jan Sumner)

Finally, after a second, then a third opinion, Sumner met with Timothy J. Sauber II, an orthopaedic surgeon with Allegheny Health Network’s Orthopaedic Institute. She went under the knife for the third time and now, 10 years later, she’s starting to regain what she had slowly lost, she said.

During those 10 years, Jan and her husband Randy Sumner, high school sweethearts who will celebrate 45 years of marriage this summer, slowly began curtailing their travels, shying away from trips with a lot of walking.

“We’d plan our vacations to be slow-moving. Because if we took one of those walking tours, we’d be way in the back, and they’d have to wait up for us and whatnot,” Jan said. “And we’re too young for him to be my caretaker.”

But since her surgery in December, those worries have faded.

“Now we’re able to plan trips and not have to worry about the walking,” she said. “We have a trip planned to Glacier National Park in Banff for August for our anniversary, and we’ll be able to walk those trails.”

“I know my husband now has a peace of mind that I’m not always in pain. And now we can enjoy retirement. He just retired, and so now we can plan these trips and do more things with the grandchildren,” all 12 of whom live fewer than two miles away.

“Three weeks after my surgery was Christmas and I made dinner for 20 of us,” she said with pride. “I never thought I was going to be able to do that.” Her husband “was in awe. He couldn’t believe it” when he witnessed her lightning fast recovery, she said.

Before her latest surgery, standing even just for a few minutes had been well beyond her pain threshold. But now, even the lives of the couple’s dogs, Marley and Maisie, have vastly improved, she said, laughing, “because I can take them for a walk now. They’re much happier.”

The spousal perspective

Patients waiting 10 or 15 years to seek help is not uncommon, said Sauber. And they’ll often underplay their symptoms during the initial visit, he said. Many times, spouses are more willing to share an accurate account of their partners’ suffering than the patients themselves.

“They’ll say, ‘They limp all the time. You know, they’re saying now that it doesn’t really bother them, but every time we go for a walk, they start complaining, and then they turn around and go home much earlier than I would prefer to go home,’” Sauber said.

Matthew Dietz, the chair of orthopaedic surgery at West Virginia University’s School of Medicine, has seen plenty of stubborn patients through the years, insisting everything is fine when it clearly isn’t.

“The farmers and coal miners are my toughest patients. They come in, they’ll put up with anything. They’re crawling out to feed the horses and cows or get on the tractor,” he said. “And then it’s the family member who admits ‘They can’t walk straight. ... They’re grumpy all the time.’ And then they’re the ones that, a lot of times, will push and say, ‘Hey, we need to do something.’”



Chuck Wonsettler and wife Rose Bigley rode horses six hours per day during a six-day excursion to the Canadian Rockies.
(Courtesy of Rose Bigley)

One of Deitz's patients, beef cattle farmer Chuck Wonsettler of Washington, had his knees replaced in 2016 and 2023. Wonsettler and wife Rose Bigley talked by phone recently while at the Fort Lauderdale airport on their return trip from an eight-day Caribbean cruise.

Bigley said her husband was especially enamored with the shipboard climbing wall during the voyage.

"He was really climbing this wall every day, several times a day," she said. "The one attendant said, 'I have to ask you how old are you,' because he runs up that wall like someone in their 30s, and he couldn't believe it when Chuck told him he was 71."

Bigley said watching other cruise couples struggling with one partner's mobility issues drove home how different things could be if Wonsettler had decided to live with the pain instead of seeking surgery.

She was surprised "seeing how many people that come on a cruise that have limited mobility. And I helped one lady last night — she was an older lady, and she was a petite thing, and she's trying to push her husband in a wheelchair up a ramp. She just could barely do it."

Often traversing their farm via horseback, last summer they embarked on a six-day riding trip near Calgary in the Canadian Rockies. The once-in-a-lifetime adventure had been put on the backburner for a time, but Wonsettler's impressive recovery from knee surgery finally made it possible last year.

"We rode horses six days straight, for six hours a day," said Bigley. Pre-surgery, "I wouldn't have put him through that much pain because he was in pain for an hour-long ride around our home." The two have also returned to another shared pastime — country line dancing.

Wonsettler also has been able to return to riding his bicycle to the farm every day — 16 miles roundtrip — and stack hay bales by hand — about

5,000 square and 100 round bales every season — for his cattle.

Dietz said around the six-week to three-month recovery mark, patients can see what the pain had been robbing them of.

“People start realizing the full benefit of what they've done. Not all their strength is back at that point, but they're getting back and doing the things that they want to do, and so that's when they're really excited. They realize this is going to be something that's changed their life.”

One patient, he recalled, stopped him at Lowes to express his gratitude. “I was just walking through and he goes, ‘Dr. Dietz, you changed my life so much. I'm able to get to the fishing hole with my buddies. I couldn't make it down the path before.’ He was essentially breaking down in tears.”

The impact of these types of surgeries goes far beyond the patient, also improving the well-being of “their loved ones, their family, their grandchildren, their overall mental health, because it really does have a lasting effect,” Dietz said.

Sumner experienced that herself, just four months into her latest recovery. “You get your life back, because you don't realize how bad it was until after it's fixed.”

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