

Are Positive Emotions Good for Your Health in Old Age?

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The notion that feeling good may be good for your health is not new, but is it really true? A new article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reviews the existing research on how positive emotions can influence health outcomes in later adulthood.

“We all age. It is *how* we age, however, that determines the quality of our lives,” said Anthony Ong of Cornell University, author of the review article. The data he reviews suggest that positive emotions may be a powerful antidote to stress, pain, and illness.

There are several pathways through which a positive attitude can protect against poor health later in life. For example, happier people might take a proactive approach to aging by regularly exercising and budgeting time for a good night’s sleep. Alternately, these people may avoid unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking and risky sex. The benefits of these healthy lifestyle choices may become more important in older adults, as their bodies become more susceptible to disease.

An optimistic outlook has also been shown to combat stress—a known risk factor for a lot of disease. Studies have found that people with stronger positive emotions have lower levels of chemicals associated with inflammation related to stress. Also, by adopting a positive attitude people may even be able to undo some of the physical damage caused by stress.

Ong, a developmental psychologist, became interested in the study of positive emotion during graduate school when he learned about what researchers call the paradox of aging: Despite the notable loss of physical function throughout the body, a person’s emotional capacity seemed to stay consistent with age. Ong speculates that if positive emotions are indeed good for our health then, “one direct, measureable consequence of this should be the extended years of quality living.”