

# Low Socioeconomic Status Means Worse Health - But Not for Everyone

March 21, 2012

Poverty is bad for your health. Poor people are much more likely to have heart disease, stroke, and cancer than wealthy people, and have a lower life expectancy, too. Children who grow up poor are more likely to have health problems as adults.

But despite these depressing statistics, many children who grow up poor have good health. In a new article published in [\*Perspectives on Psychological Science\*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), Edith Chen and Gregory E. Miller of the University of British Columbia suggest a possible reason: some children have role models who teach them to cope with stress.

“Who are these bright spots who, despite a lot of adversity, make it through and do well?” Chen asked. She suspects the answer has to do with stress. Growing up poor can be stressful, and stress increases the risk of developing chronic diseases. Poor children are less likely to have a predictable routine and a stable home; their parents may have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet and may not be able to afford to fix a leaky roof, for example. Poor children are also more likely to experience violence. One study found that nearly 50% of low income youth had witnessed a murder.

In the face of this stress, Miller and Chen propose a strategy that may work to reduce stress and improve health. They call it “shift-and-persist.” The first part, “shift,” means reappraising things that are stressful. For example, if you get fired from a job, you can feel miserable and lash out at people around you—or you can reassess the situation to find the bright side. “You think, ‘I wouldn’t choose this, but maybe it’s an opportunity to end up in a better job down the line,’” Chen says. Research on children growing up in adversity has found that children do well if they can self-regulate like this.

But it’s not enough to accept stressful situations. The second part, “persist,” has to do with staying positive in the longer term—“holding out hope and finding a broader meaning in your life,” Chen says. Shifting perspective on a particular situation helps in the short term, but, she says, “You have to do that with the idea that there’s a broader goal in mind.” Many studies have found that finding meaning helps people get through difficult situations, like spinal injuries or collective traumatic experiences like the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The way most children learn “shift-and-persist” may be through positive role models, Chen says. Parents, teachers, aunts, and other adults can model healthy ways of dealing with stress and also teach children a sense of optimism about the world.

The goal, of course, is to extend this help to other children. There are some hints that it may be possible to use community leaders to improve health, Chen says. “For example, in kids with asthma, if you get people in the community to serve as lay coaches for the parents, that can be beneficial to the kids,” she says. It may also be possible to use role models in the community to teach more children to reappraise

their stress and think positively about the future.