

Study pinpoints strategies that protect older adult's physical health

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In his famous poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night," Dylan Thomas urges us to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Researchers are now backing up this counsel in the lab; showing just how "raging" against threats to one's health is critical to good health and survival in late life.

The existing research on longevity supports the notion that one should become actively involved in one's health in an effort to prevent further decline. The elderly are urged to use "active control strategies" aimed at counteracting physical threats. Such strategies include investing time and energy in dealing with even minor health issues, seeking help when health problems are encountered, and believing that one can overcome health problems when they arise.

Carsten Wrosch of Concordia University in Montreal and Richard Schulz of the University of Pittsburgh decided to look at the long-term health impacts of these strategies. They studied elderly participants' report of daily physical symptoms (e.g., chest pain or difficulty breathing) and any subsequent (2 years later) presence of severe chronic diseases (e.g., arthritis or cancer,) and functional limitations (e.g., difficulty dressing) all the while keeping track of who was actively engaging themselves in their health.

The results, appearing in the June issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science are revealing. Among older adults who experienced many daily physical symptoms,

those who did not invest in counteracting these challenges developed approximately one additional chronic health problem and one additional functional limitation two years later. In contrast, no physical health declines were observed among older adults who were actively engaged in overcoming these health threats.

The researchers also found that the effect on changes in chronic health problems were partly mediated by an impaired diurnal cortisol rhythm, a biological process that is widely thought to be a key factor in the association between stressful experiences and physical health problems, in older adults.

The authors note that these active control strategies may not be as effective when used in the later stages of physical decline and that these findings point to a small window of opportunity in postponing long-term health declines and mortality. Wrosch and Schulz suggest that the use of these strategies can protect older adults' physical health, in part by preventing the failure of important biological systems that are particularly important in the early stages of physical decline in older individuals.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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