

Study Finds Conscientious People Have Better Health

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A recent study led by a researcher at UT Dallas reported that people classified as "conscientious" also tended to have better health, possibly because of more preventive health care.

Dr. Jennifer Lodi-Smith, a postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Vital [Longevity](#), was principal investigator on the study. Her paper, published in *Psychology and Health*, looked at how the [personality trait](#) of [conscientiousness](#), being organized and reliable, relates to health in adults.

The study involved two samples. The first was a random group of 617 Illinois residents ages 18-86, and the other was a community sample of 274 Illinois residents ages 18-89. The researchers found that conscientious individuals are likely to be healthy, Lodi-Smith said.

The relationship between conscientiousness and health appears to occur in part because conscientious individuals are better educated and engage in more preventive [health behaviors](#), such as exercising, visiting doctors for routine check-ups, and eating well.

The connection between conscientiousness and [good health](#) was particularly strong among [older adults](#) in the study, she said. Conscientiousness was measured using a standard personality instrument that assesses individuals' ability to focus on and complete tasks, control impulses and engage in behaviors that offer long-term rather than immediate rewards.

Lodi-Smith said her team's work is the latest in a string of studies that show conscientiousness plays a significant role in determining longevity. Likewise, it appears to significantly affect a person's level of educational attainment and occupational success.

“Being conscientious predicts good health because the conscientious individual is actually going to go out and do the things their doctor says they should be doing to stay healthy,” she said. “For example, if two men are diagnosed with diabetes on the same day, one month later the more conscientious man will refuse a serving of ice cream at a party while the less conscientious man may forget to take his insulin the same evening.”

Tobacco use, poor diet, a low level of physical activity, excessive alcohol and drug use, risky sexual behavior and exposure to violence are among the primary contributors to poor health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, cancer and accidental death. An analysis of the relationship between conscientiousness and these leading behavioral contributors to mortality showed conscientiousness was connected instead to every category of health-related behavior relevant to longevity.

Researchers can conclude that “conscientiousness helps individuals to shape their health in part by shaping their environment and their daily patterns of behavior,” according to the paper.

“One of the most surprising findings in the present research was that risky health-related behaviors did not correspond to lower levels of self-reported health,” Lodi-Smith wrote. “It may be the case that individuals who engage in risky health-related behaviors may not perceive and/or report expected levels of poor health. By including additional measures of health such as body-mass index, number of medical conditions and physician evaluations of health, future research may be able to establish risky health-related behaviors as a meaningful mediator of the relationship between conscientiousness and health.”

Given the latest findings within a relatively small sample of adults, it is critical that future research looking at the behavior affecting life outcomes examines individual differences and captures a broader array of personality characteristics, she said.

“I think the most interesting and compelling finding of these studies was actually relegated to a footnote in that these patterns were most robust in people over age 60,” she said. “In my work at the Center for Vital Longevity, I am focusing on understanding one of the central challenges of aging - the aging mind. Using statistical models similar to the ones in this study, I am investigating how personality traits shape everyday experience to facilitate and promote healthy neurocognitive function long-term.”

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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