

Peace of mind closes health gap for less-educated

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Psychological well-being is powerful enough to counteract the pull of socioeconomic status on the long-term health of the disadvantaged, according to a study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Lack of education is a powerful predictor of future poor [health](#) and a relatively early death. But among people whose formal education ended with a high school diploma or less, positive psychological characteristics such as meaningful relationships with others and a sense of purpose have a strong connection with lower levels of an [inflammatory protein](#) connected to an array of potentially deadly health problems.

"If you didn't go that far in your education, but you walk around feeling good psychological stuff, you may not be more likely to suffer ill-health than people with a lot of schooling," says Carol Ryff, UW-Madison psychology professor and co-author of the study, which appears in the current online edition of the journal *Health Psychology*. "Low [educational attainment](#) does not guarantee bad [health consequences](#), or poor biological regulation."

The researchers measured levels of Interleukin-6 in participants in the Survey of Midlife in the United States, a now 10-year-long study of age-related differences in physical and mental health.

"High levels of IL-6 are associated with many kinds of cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, [metabolic syndrome](#), some cancers and other

health problems," says Jennifer Morozink, a UW-Madison psychology graduate student and lead author of the study. "These positive psychological characteristics all moderate the level of IL-6 for people without much education."

Less-educated people who scored high on measures of general happiness or self-acceptance or who felt that the circumstances of their lives were manageable showed levels of the inflammatory protein comparable to similarly satisfied, but highly-educated peers.

The results are significant, according to Ryff, because they reinforce a new angle on eliminating the wide gap in overall health between the well-to-do and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

"Other research shows that these psychological factors respond well to intervention," Ryff says. "Therapies exist that give people the tools to keep all these psychological characteristics working in their favor. They've been shown to keep people from falling back into depression and anxiety, which we know means bad things for their health."

The study, which was funded by the National Institute on Aging and included UW-Madison psychology professor Chris Coe and Institute on Aging scientist Elliot Friedman, melds two new directions in research: a focus on why socioeconomic inequality has such detrimental health effects for have-nots, and a shift toward scrutinizing the health impacts of positive psychological attributes, in contrast to decades of research linking psychological disorders and maladjustment to poor physical health.

"There's a far richer understanding of how people get these strong psychosocial characteristics than there was not that long ago," Morozink says. "There are studies of the brain showing people with higher levels of well-being react differently to negative situations."

Environmental factors are also important in developing resiliency in the face of trying circumstances.

"Attentive parents, strong role models and feeling engaged in and important to their community could contribute a great deal to these psychological characteristics," Ryff says.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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