

Positive social traits trump bad health habits

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Many studies have documented the dangers of the traditional negative physical risk factors on health – excessive smoking, drinking and being overweight. But far less research has focused on less-tangible, positive influences -- the protective role of psychological and social supports.

New research by Margie E. Lachman Ph.D. and Stefan Agrigoroaei Ph.D. of the Brandeis Psychology Department explores the psychological roots of health. Lachman is Director of the Lifespan Developmental Psychological Laboratory in the Department of Psychology, and Agrigoroaei is a postdoctoral researcher at the lab.

What Lachman and Agrigoroaei found in The Midlife in the U.S. (MIDUS) study, involving 3,626 adults aged 32 to 84 who were assessed over two periods about 10 years apart, was that with proper protective elements in place, declines in health could be delayed by up to a decade. Their findings indicate that specific psychological, social, and physical protective factors are associated with better health in later life.

The research identified physical exercise, social support and control beliefs, individually and in combination, as significant predictors of change in functional health, above and beyond the negative effects of the traditional [risk factors](#).

"Control beliefs" refer to a person's sense of how much they can influence important life outcomes. Those who have a greater sense of control are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors, such as getting exercise and eating right. Supportive social relationships can

promote health by reducing stress and encouraging healthy behaviors.

The research is reported in an article "Promoting Functional Health in Midlife and Old Age: Long-Term Protective Effects of Control Beliefs, Social Support, and Physical Exercise," just published in *PlosOne*.

The researchers note that the results are encouraging for the prospect of developing interventions to promote functional health, and for reducing public [health](#) costs for disabilities later in life.

Provided by Brandeis University

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