

Positive teens become healthier adults

July 19 2011

Teenagers are known for their angst-ridden ways, but those who remain happy and positive during the tumultuous teenage years report better general health when they are adults, according to a new Northwestern University study.

Researchers also found that teens with high positive well-being had a reduced risk of engaging in [unhealthy behaviors](#) such as smoking, [binge drinking](#), using drugs and eating [unhealthy foods](#) as they transitioned into young adulthood.

The study, one of the first to focus on the effect positive psychological characteristics in adolescence can have on long-term health, is published in the July 2011 issue of the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#).

"Our study shows that promoting and nurturing positive well-being during the teenage years may be a promising way to improve long-term health," said Lindsay Till Hoyt, first author of the study and a fifth-year doctoral student in human development and social policy at Northwestern.

Hoyt is also an affiliate of Cells to Society (C2S): The Center on [Social Disparities](#) and Health within the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern (IPR).

The results come from the analysis of data collected from 10,147 young people as part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health began collecting data on this set of teenagers

in 1994, asking them a series of questions, including questions about their physical and [emotional health](#) and well-being. The group was followed up on in 1996 and 2001.

In order to measure positive well-being in adolescence, Hoyt and her team went back to the 1994 data from that specific sample of young people and examined their answers to a series of "well-being" questions. These questions focused on topics that gauged the teens' sense of happiness, enjoyment of life, hopefulness for the future, self-esteem and [social acceptance](#). They used these measures of positive well-being during adolescence (measured in 1994) to predict perceived general health and risky health behaviors in young adulthood (measured in 2001). The researchers controlled the study for health conditions in adolescence, socioeconomic status, symptoms of depression and other known predictors of long-term health.

"Our results show that positive well-being during adolescence is significantly associated with reporting excellent health in [young adulthood](#)," said Emma K. Adam, co-author and associate professor of education and social policy and IPR faculty fellow at C2S.

"Positive well-being is more than just the absence of depression; the influence of a teenager's positive well-being on long-term good health is present even after accounting for the negative health effects of experiencing depressive symptoms in adolescence," Adam said.

The second outcome of the study showed that the adolescents who reported higher positive well-being as a teen in 1994 were less likely to engage in risky health behaviors as a young adult, in 2001.

"A lot of health-intervention programs for adolescents are problem-focused, but if well-being matters for long-term health, reinforcing and trying to develop positive [psychological characteristics](#) is something we

need to think about," Hoyt said. "People have used a positive youth development approach to curb problems like delinquency and improve school achievement, but this approach may also be a way to help improve the health of young people."

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Positive teens become healthier adults (2011, July 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-07-positive-teens-healthier-adults.html>

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