

Caregiver personality traits can affect health

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(Medical Xpress) -- Taking care of an aging or disabled loved one can be hazardous to your health. But certain personality traits appear to reduce caregivers' risk for health problems, reports a new Cornell study.

"Personality accounted for about a quarter of the variance in caregivers' mental health and about 10 percent of the variance in their [physical health](#)," said lead author Corinna Loeckenhoff, assistant professor of human development in Cornell's College of [Human Ecology](#).

The study, published in *Psychology and Aging* (26:3), was co-authored with Paul Duberstein and Bruce Friedman of the University of Rochester and Paul Costa Jr. of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

To better understand what puts some caregivers at greater risk or makes them more resilient, the authors analyzed data on more than 500 informal caregivers of [older adults](#) with multiple impairments in New York, Ohio and West Virginia. Of the caregivers, 98 percent were white and 72 percent were female; their mean age was 63.

The researchers examined the links among caregivers' [personality traits](#); self-reported health; two factors thought to affect health -- caregiver strain (feeling overloaded, worried) and self-efficacy (feeling confident in one's abilities); and the physical and [mental impairment](#) of the care recipients.

They measured five basic personality traits to assess the caregivers'

tendency to be negative/anxious (neuroticism), energetic/outgoing (extraversion), inventive/curious (openness), friendly/compassionate ([agreeableness](#)) and efficient/organized ([conscientiousness](#)).

As expected, the team found personality-health links. Extraversion was positively associated with mental and physical health, for example, whereas neuroticism was negatively associated with mental and physical health. The researchers also found that both caregiver strain and self-efficacy played a role in this association between personality and health.

"We expected that self-efficacy would play an important role for subjective health, but we were surprised to see that it was much more important than caregiver strain," said Loeckenhoff. "In fact, it mediated every single significant association between personality traits and subjective health that we observed."

The authors suggest that one reason why personality traits affect [health](#) is that these traits powerfully influence caregivers' perceptions of their ability to successfully manage the daily challenges they face.

"Our findings tie in with the recent literature on resilience," said Loeckenhoff. "To understand how people deal with a challenge, it's not sufficient to focus on the sources of stress and strain. It is also critical to examine the resources that people can draw on."

"Our findings suggest that initiatives to assist caregivers could usefully include measures of personality traits to identify caregiver strengths and weaknesses and those most at risk. Interventions might also target self-efficacy beliefs because while personality traits are relatively stable over time, self-efficacy beliefs can change as a result of verbal instruction, personal experience and observing role models."

Provided by Cornell University

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