

Born to lead? No sweat

September 24 2012, by Randy Dotinga, Healthday Reporter



Study suggests the power that comes with authority keeps anxiety at bay.

(HealthDay)—It's good to be the boss. How good? New research suggests that leaders suffer from less stress than people in less powerful positions.

The findings in the new study don't prove that leadership is a natural stress reliever, however. It's possible that people with lower [anxiety levels](#) are better able to tolerate being at the top of the ladder.

Still, the research "does point to the importance of gaining leadership and a sense of control that would buffer against stress," said Gary Sherman, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University and the study's lead author.

The study results may seem to be counterintuitive. [Popular culture](#)

suggests that leaders often are stressed-out workaholics, sometimes with a classic type-A personality. And there's also the common belief (although science still [debates](#) it) that stress leads to gray hair, a [phenomenon](#) that seems to be especially noticeable in men in an extremely powerful leadership position—the U.S. presidency. (Then again, [presidents](#) may go gray just because they're getting older, like everybody else.)

The new study is the largest of its kind, Sherman said. In one experiment, the researchers asked 148 leaders and 65 non-leaders about their stress levels. The researchers also tested their levels of [cortisol](#), a hormone linked to anxiety.

The leaders were at Harvard University to attend a leadership program. They included a variety of managers in fields such as finance, real estate and administrative services. Many worked for the government.

The leaders were more likely to be male and wealthier. They exercised more, consumed more caffeine, smoked less and woke up earlier (6 a.m. on average versus 7:30 a.m. for non-leaders). They also slept a bit less than the non-leaders.

The researchers found that the leaders reported being less stressed than the non-leaders. The levels of cortisol in the leaders were also 27 percent lower than in the non-leaders, Sherman said.

In another experiment, the researchers compared stress levels between leaders and lower-level leaders (75 people in total). Again, those with more power appeared to be less stressed.

"Among [leaders](#)," the study authors said, "lower stress levels go hand in hand with greater rank and power."

So what's going on? Previous research has suggested that a sense of control—or lack of it—has a major effect on [stress levels](#), Sherman said.

Richard Elliot Wener, professor of environmental psychology at Polytechnic Institute of New York University, agreed. He has studied stress in commuters and found that they become more anxious as they lose control and the ability to predict what's going to happen.

"Lack of control and predictability are key to stress," he said. "If you're the boss, you control important factors."

The design of the new study didn't allow the researchers to reach firm conclusions, however. Researchers hope to later track stress in people over time to see what happens as they move up and down the career ladder, Sherman said.

The study appeared online Sept. 24 in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

More information: Leadership is associated with lower levels of stress, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1207042109

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