

Lonely older adults face more health risks

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Always look on the bright side of life. Thanks to a new study from Concordia University, this catchy refrain offers a prescription for staying healthy during one's golden years.

Research has shown that lonely [older adults](#) are at greater risk of developing health problems but a new study by Carsten Wrosch, a professor in Concordia's Department of Psychology and member of the Centre for Research in Human Development, offers hope. In a forthcoming article in [Psychosomatic Medicine](#), Wrosch proves that older adults who approach life with a positive outlook can reverse the negative health issues associated with a lonely life.

"Our aim was to see whether using self-protective strategies, such as thinking positively and avoiding self-blame in the context of common age-related threats could prevent lonely older adults from exhibiting increases in [stress hormones](#) and inflammatory biomarkers," explains Wrosch, who co-authored the article with Concordia's PhD graduate, Rebecca Rueggeberg, and colleagues Gregory Miller from the University of British Columbia and Thomas McDade from Northwestern University in Illinois.

To test this, the research team followed 122 [senior citizens](#) over a six-year period. They measured self-protective strategies with a questionnaire where participants were asked to rate statements such as, "Even if my health is in very difficult condition, I can find something positive in life," or "When I find it impossible to overcome a health problem, I try not to blame myself." The research team also measured

loneliness by asking participants to what extent they felt lonely or isolated during a typical day.

Wrosch and his colleagues also used saliva and blood samples to measure how much cortisol and C-reactive protein (CRP) the participants produced. These two [biological markers](#) were chosen because cortisol is responsible for stress-related changes in the body; and people with elevated CRP are at increased risk of inflammatory illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

Their findings showed that, among lonely older adults, the use of positive thinking helped protect against an increase in cortisol secretion. Four years down the road, further tests showed the participants' CRP levels had improved. In essence, lonely older adults who reframe problematic health circumstances positively and do not blame themselves for negative health issues can decrease health threats associated with stress and inflammation. For those older adults who did not report feelings of loneliness, this type of thinking had no effect – supposedly because their social networks may help them deal with age-related problems.

Overall, these findings could contribute to successful aging. "It's my hope that our research may improve clinical treatment of lonely older adults," says Wrosch. "Older adults can be taught through counseling or therapy to engage in self-protective thoughts like staying positive when it comes to their own health. That means a better quality of life, both physically and mentally – something we all want at any age."

Provided by Concordia University

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