

Positive mental health boosts lifespan, study finds

November 15 2012, by Carol Clark



(Medical Xpress)—People who are flourishing – both feeling happy and functioning well in their lives – are 60 percent less likely to die prematurely, finds a major study that followed more than 3,000 U.S. adults over 10 years.

The results, published in the [American Journal of Public Health](#), applied

to both men and women of varying ages, races, weights and socio-economic status.

"We've shown that, even when you factor in many other variables, if you are flourishing you have a dramatically lower risk of premature mortality, no matter what the cause of death," says lead author Corey Keyes, a sociologist at Emory University and a [pioneer of positive psychology](#).

The data for the analysis drew from the Midlife in the United States Study, which measured baseline positive mental health of the participants in 1995, and followed up in 2005. The ages of the participants spanned 25 to 74 at the beginning of the study, and 35 to 84 at the conclusion.

In the [baseline survey](#), the participants were asked if they had suffered within the past year from depression, [panic disorder](#) or [generalized anxiety](#), conditions that have been associated with a higher risk of [premature mortality](#). They were also assessed for [emotional happiness](#), or simply feeling good, and for whether they were functioning well in life, or flourishing. The term flourishing encompasses factors such as managing stress, achieving intimacy with others, working productively and making a contribution to society.

Nearly 50 percent of the [study participants](#), who were representative of the general population, met the criteria for sufficiently high emotional well-being. Only 18 percent, however, were flourishing, meaning they met the full criteria of sufficiently high emotional well-being, combined with sufficiently high social well-being.

"You need both of these qualities for complete happiness," Keyes says.

A total of 6.3 percent of the participants died during the study period.

The odds ratio for mortality was 1.62 for adults who were not flourishing, relative to participants with flourishing mental health.

"What was most amazing to me was that the results held for all ages," Keyes says. "Even late in life, if you are flourishing you are significantly less likely to die prematurely."

Tobacco use and physical inactivity, behaviors associated in previous studies with people who have lower levels of emotional well-being, may partially explain how positive mental health affects mortality, Keyes says.

"We focus so much of our national health resources on treating mental illness, when it's actually the absence of well-being that is getting to us," Keyes says. "It may be common sense, but it's uncommon public policy to invest more in promoting well-being."

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22994191

Provided by Emory University

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