

Upbeat view on old age may help seniors bounce back from disability

November 20 2012, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter



Study found those with more optimistic outlooks had better recoveries.

(HealthDay)—Seniors who tend to think of other older people as spry instead of decrepit are far more likely to bounce back after a serious disability than people with a more negative outlook, according to a new study.

Older people who had positive age stereotypes were 44 percent more likely to recover completely from a severe disability. They also were 23 percent more likely to progress from a severe disability to a mild disability.

"This research suggests that we might want to think about the role of [positive health](#) stereotypes in disability," said the study's lead author, Becca Levy, associate professor of [epidemiology](#) and [psychology](#) at the

Yale School of Public Health in New Haven, Conn.

Results of the study are published as a research letter in the Nov. 21 issue of the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#).

The researchers say they began the study because little research has been done to figure out why some [seniors](#) recover from disability and others do not. They recruited more than 700 people aged 70 or older who were not disabled at the start of the study. During the 11-year follow-up period, nearly 600 people were disabled for at least a month.

The disability had to affect a person's ability to perform activities of daily living, such as dressing and feeding themselves.

During the study, the researchers asked the study volunteers, "When you think of old persons, what are the first five words or [phrases](#) that come to mind?" Their responses were graded on a scale of one (most negative) to five (most positive). A word such as "decrepit" scored a one, while the word "spry" scored a five.

Those with a more positive attitude toward seniors were far more likely to recover completely from their disability. The positive group had almost an 8 percent higher recovery rate from a severe disability to no disability. A similar improvement occurred in the rates of going from severe disability to mild disability.

There also was a slight improvement in the rates of people going from a mild disability to no disability for those with positive age stereotypes.

A few factors could be at play here, Levy said. One could be that a [positive attitude](#) might help buffer against stress and lessen cardiovascular responses to challenges, which could reduce disability from heart issues.

She said it's also possible that people who believe older folks can still be strong may be more likely to go to rehabilitation, and to participate in vigorous exercise programs that may help improve their disability.

Another expert noted how society's view of aging has changed.

"Active life spans have increased for older people, even from just 20 years ago," said Dr. Gary Kennedy, director of the division of geriatric psychiatry at Montefiore Medical Center, in New York City. "That might help make people's perspectives more positive."

And, he added, positive people may "stay physically active, and that can-do attitude lets you attack your problems more aggressively, making you more likely to keep at it until you're better."

If you tend to be more negative naturally, Levy noted, "there are many positive examples out there. Try to think about ways of bolstering positive age stereotypes, and questioning negative [stereotypes](#)."

Although the study found an association between having a positive view of aging and better recovery from disability, it did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship.

More information: Learn more about preventing falls, a common cause of disability, from the [U.S. National Institutes of Health's Senior Health website](#).

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