

Aggressively pursuing higher social status may exact a toll on health

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Aggressive dominance is routine in the animal kingdom. But when people resort to aggression and intimidation to gain social status, it may come at a cost on their own health, psychologists at the University of Utah have found. Attaining higher social status as the result of prestige and freely given respect may have protective effects, studies showed. Credit: Tambako, Flickr

Bad news for relentless power-seekers the likes of Frank Underwood on House of Cards: Climbing the ladder of social status through aggressive, competitive striving might shorten your life as a result of increased

vulnerability to cardiovascular disease. That's according to new research by psychologist Timothy W. Smith and colleagues at the University of Utah. And good news for successful types who are friendlier: Attaining higher social status as the result of prestige and freely given respect may have protective effects, the researchers found.

Smith presented the findings at the annual meeting of the American Psychosomatic Society this week in Savannah, GA. The Utah researchers conducted four studies to gauge the health effects of the hostile-dominant personality style compared with the warm-dominant style.

In surveys with 500 undergraduate volunteers, hostile-dominant types reported greater hostility and interpersonal stress. Warm-dominant types tended to rank themselves as higher in [social status](#). Both styles were associated with a higher personal sense of power.

The psychologists also monitored the [blood pressure](#) of 180 undergraduates as they reacted to stressful conversations with others who were scripted to act deferentially or dominantly. Hostile-dominant types experienced significant increases in blood pressure when interacting with a dominant partner, but not with a deferential one. Previous studies have found that increased blood pressure reactivity to stress puts people at risk for [cardiovascular disease](#).

In a third study with 94 young, married couples, Smith and colleagues found that hostile-dominance in men was linked with higher blood pressure recorded throughout the day with a wearable monitor, but not among women. Warm-dominance in women predicted [lower blood pressure](#), but not in men.

Among 154 older, married couples (average age of 63), a warm-dominant style was associated with less conflict and more support. A

hostile-dominant style was associated with more severe atherosclerosis in men and women, as measured by [coronary artery calcification](#). Hostile-dominance was also linked with greater marital conflict and lower marital support.

"It's not a style that wears well with other people," Smith says. The good news is that people can take steps to change a hostile personality style. "Something usually has to fall apart first before they are willing to entertain that option," Smith says. "But there is some evidence that it is possible to teach old dogs new tricks, and if you do, it can reduce coronary risk."

Provided by University of Utah

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