

An active social life associated with well-being in life

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Staying active socially despite health-related challenges appears to help lessen the decline in well-being people often experience late in life, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Our results indicate that living a socially active life and prioritizing

social goals are associated with higher late-life satisfaction and less severe declines toward the end of life," said study lead author Denis Gerstorf, PhD, of Humboldt University. The research was published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Gerstorf and his colleagues analyzed data from over 2,900 now deceased participants in the nationwide German Socio-Economic Panel Study (48 percent women, average age at death 74). The German SOEP is a nationally representative annual longitudinal survey of approximately 30,000 adult residents in former West Germany from 1984 to 2013 and former East Germany from 1990 to 2013. Participants in the SOEP provide information annually on household composition, employment, occupations, earnings, health and satisfaction indicators.

In this study, the researchers compared well-being (as measured by answers on a scale of 0 to 10 to the question, "How satisfied are you with your life concurrently, all things considered?"), participation in social activities, social goals (how important they found participating in social or political activities) and family goals (how much they valued their marriage or relationships with their children) during the last few years in life.

The research team, including scholars from Arizona State University, Cornell University, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of British Columbia, found that being socially active and having social goals were associated with higher well-being late in life, but family goals were not. This association was independent of other relevant variables including age at death, gender, education as well as key health indicators (e.g., disability, hospital stays).

One particularly intriguing observation was that while low social participation and lack of social goals independently were associated with lower levels of well-being, when combined they each magnified the

other's effect.

Valuing and pursuing social goals may contribute to well-being by boosting feelings of competence, concern for the next generation and belonging, said Gerstorf. Similarly, investing one's remaining physical and psychological resources into socially oriented activities can be advantageous at a number of different levels (e.g., boosting well-being directly by carrying out joyful activities or indirectly by facilitating self-esteem and a sense of control or promoting physical and cognitive functioning).

"A socially engaged lifestyle often involves cognitive stimulation and physical activity, which in turn may protect against the neurological and physical factors underlying cognitive decline," said Gert Wagner from the German Institute for Economic Research, one of the co-authors. "Our results indicate that social orientation is related to maintaining well-being for as long as possible into the very last years of life."

As to why family-oriented goals did not appear to lessen the decline in well-being, Gerstorf said it may have to do with the complexity of family relationships later in life, but more research would be required to determine it.

"Family [life](#) is often a mixed bag and represents not only a source of joy, but also of worry and tensions, stress, and sorrow. For example, valuing one's partner often makes people vulnerable to declines in well-being when the partner suffers from cognitive or physical limitations," said Gerstorf. "Similarly, relationships with adult children can be ambivalent, especially when children differ in values and have not attained (in the eyes of their parents) educational and interpersonal success."

More information: "Terminal Decline in Well-Being: The Role of Social Orientation," by Denis Gerstorf, PhD, Humboldt University and

German Institute for Economic Research; Christiane Hoppmann, PhD, University of British Columbia; Corinna Löckenhoff, PhD, Cornell University; Frank Infurna, PhD, Arizona State University; Jürgen Schupp, PhD; German Institute for Economic Research and Freie Universität Berlin; Gert Wagner, PhD, German Institute for Economic Research and Max Planck Institute for Human Development; and Nilam Ram, PhD, German Institute for Economic Research and Pennsylvania State University, *Psychology and Aging*, published online March 7, 2016.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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