

Many kinds of happiness promote better health, study finds

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Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

A new study links the capacity to feel a variety of upbeat emotions to better health.

The research suggests people who experience a range of positive emotions in their daily lives – from enthusiasm to cheerfulness and calm – have lower levels of inflammation, compared to those who experience

a narrower range of emotions. Lower levels of inflammation are linked to a lower risk of premature death and chronic diseases like diabetes. The researchers drew on analytic approaches used to measure the biodiversity of ecosystems. Their study was published June 22 in the journal *Emotion*.

"There are many kinds of happiness, and experiencing a diversity of emotional states might reduce a person's vulnerability to psychopathology by preventing any one emotion from dominating their emotional life," said lead author Anthony Ong, professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology and professor of geriatrics and palliative medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine.

Little is known about the biological processes through which [emotional experiences](#) influence health outcomes. This study sought to fill a bit of that gap.

Specifically, the study sheds light on one potential biological pathway – [systemic inflammation](#) – through which diversity in everyday positive emotional [experiences](#) might "get under the skin" to influence long-term health.

Ong and his colleagues analyzed the connection between "emodiversity" – the breadth and abundance of different emotions people experience – and markers of inflammation in the body. A person with low emodiversity feels about the same through most of the day, with emotions concentrated in just a few categories. In contrast, a person with high emodiversity feels a range of emotions throughout the day, distributed evenly across the spectrum of feelings.

The researchers analyzed data from 175 people ages 40 to 65 who reported on their negative and positive emotions for 30 days. Each evening, they rated the extent to which they had experienced 16 positive

emotions that day, from interested and determined to happy, excited, amused, inspired, alert, active and strong. They were also asked to rate their experience of 16 negative emotions, including scared, afraid, upset, distressed, jittery, nervous and ashamed. Their blood was drawn six months later and was tested for three inflammation markers that circulate in the blood.

Their range of [negative emotions](#) – regardless of whether it was narrow or wide – had no effect on inflammation.

But people in the study who reported a wide range of positive emotions had lower levels of inflammation than those who said they felt a narrower range.

"Emotions serve functional roles for individuals, helping them prioritize and regulate behavior in ways that optimize adjustment to situational demands," Ong said. "Our findings suggest that depletion or overabundance of [positive emotions](#), in particular, has consequences for the functioning and health of one's emotional ecosystem."

Growing evidence from other research has linked [emotional](#) processes with systemic [inflammation](#), which has been shown to contribute to poor [health](#), such as atherosclerosis, diabetes, rheumatoid disease and osteoporosis, and leads to a number of processes that play a major role in [premature death](#).

How can these findings help one achieve [better health](#)?

Label your good feelings as you experience them, Ong said.

"The simple daily practice of labeling and categorizing good feelings in specific terms may help us experience more differentiated emotions in different contexts," Ong said.

More information: Anthony D. Ong et al. Emodiversity and Biomarkers of Inflammation., *Emotion* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000343](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000343)

Provided by Cornell University

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