

The keys to a long and healthy life

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Even as infectious illnesses such as smallpox and polio have receded into the past, many chronic diseases have flourished.

But don't be discouraged, write two UConn researchers in Social Science and Medicine. The ingredients for a long, healthy life are within our grasp.

Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of Psychological Sciences Blair Johnson and Rebecca Acabchuk, a physiology and neurobiology postdoctoral research associate, wrote the review as part of a golden jubilee celebration for the journal. They reviewed trends in the [health psychology](#) field that have developed over the past 50 years and reached some happy conclusions.

"Many of the trends we observe in health psychology are part of trends in science and health" more generally, the researchers say. The science on this topic tells a consistent story: to be healthy and long lived, we need to maintain a sense of purpose, pursue positive social relationships and healthy habits, eat a nutritious diet, and get sufficient exercise and sleep. Moderation and optimism are best.

The classic Western medical approach to disease is to look at it in isolation: here is a sick person with diabetes, his pancreas is not properly regulating sugar, medicine can fix that. But while medicine can sometimes fix that, half a century of research into [health psychology](#) is coming together now to show how socioeconomic factors, culture, physiology, biology and environment all influence health and well being, report Johnson and Acabchuk.

In other words, if we want to be healthy, thinking of disease in isolation may not be thinking about it the right way. People exist in a web of social interactions that influence their psychology and biology. Research is showing that attempts to improve a person's health are most successful when they include the social aspects of a person's life as well.

Stress is a particularly important factor. Higher levels of it can increase inflammation, leading to autoimmune diseases and cancer; change the rate at which we gain weight and the parts of our body where we gain it; alter our sugar metabolism to push us toward diabetes; increase our blood pressure to stress our hearts; and decrease the sensitivity of our

nervous systems. All of these changes can be self-reinforcing. And once we're in a state of ill health, that itself can become a stressor that changes our behavior and cause our health to further deteriorate.

Trauma, harassment, and poverty are major stressors. Research has shown that social adversity such as unemployment and a lack of social support can reduce immune function. Other studies show a link between low education levels, stress, and increased inflammation, leading to shorter lifespans. Stress leaves a biological signature. So how do we get it to write upon us more lightly?

It's true that stress is everywhere, and people can be stressed by their jobs, by their families, by their social obligations to others, or by their own hopes and dreams. But strong, healthy relationships can inoculate us against many ills. Marriage is good for men in particular. Apparently their partners tend to monitor their behavior and push them into healthier lifestyles. Happy marriages benefit both genders, though, and relationship satisfaction at age 50 is a better predictor of health status at age 80 than genetics.

Good social networks are protective as well. People with larger social networks catch fewer colds than people with smaller networks (counterintuitively, as the larger network would usually offer more opportunities for exposure to the virus). Having a sense of purpose and meaning in life is also protective. And volunteer work has been shown to improve mental health.

"Although many factors may remain out of an individual's control, behavior change strategies can empower individuals and populations to improve health, longevity, and quality of life," Johnson and Acabchuck write. New forms of cognitive behavioral therapy based on mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and acceptance are an example. But the researchers also suggest that society and government could do a much

better job promoting healthy behaviors.

While not everyone can choose where they live, and not all disease is preventable, the review concludes that a sense of purpose, strong social bonds, and [healthy habits](#) offer a recipe for successful living and aging that everyone can work toward this new year.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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