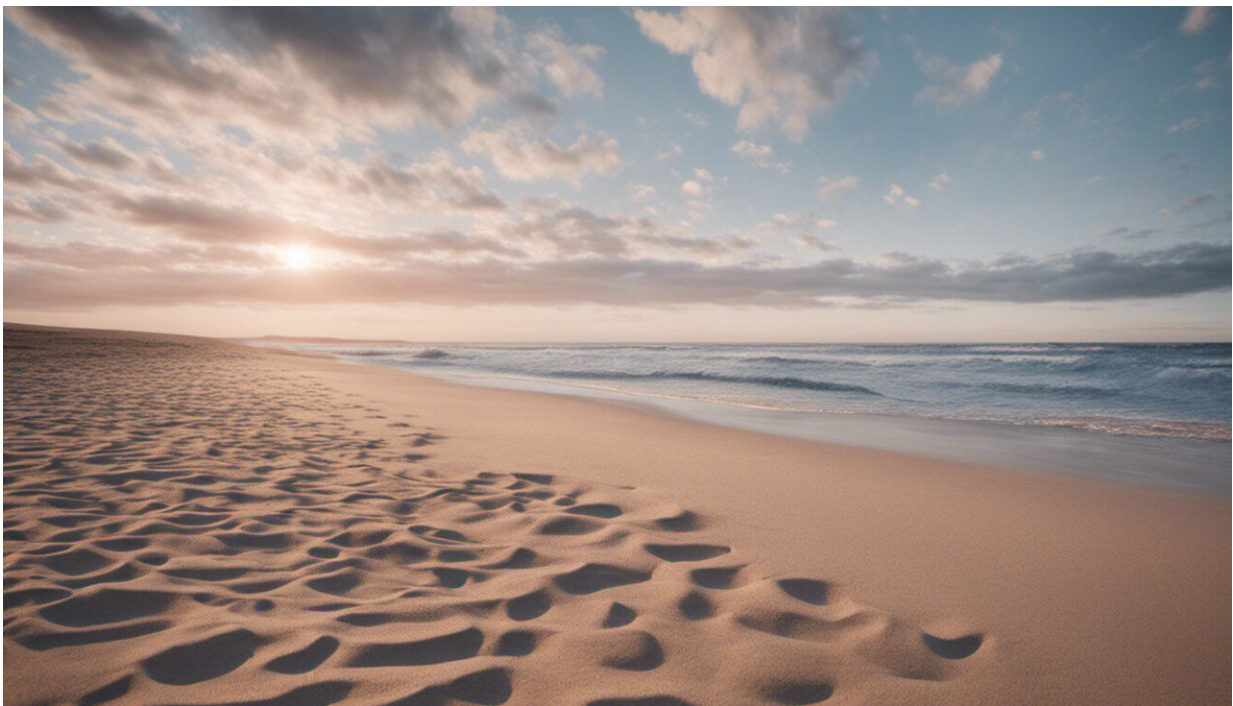


Stop worrying about not getting enough exercise and being too stressed – you may live longer

January 5 2018, by Robin Bailey



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's January, so it's likely that you have set yourself goals to be more physically active and less stressed in 2018. Paradoxically, better goals would be to stop worrying about how much exercise you're getting and to stop worrying about being too stressed.

A [recent study](#) of over 60,000 US adults examined the link between perceptions of exercise and mortality. The researchers found something curious: people who worried about being less active than others were up to 71% more likely to die in follow up period 21 years later, regardless of their actual levels of [physical activity](#) or overall [health](#).

Inversely, [believing you are getting enough exercise](#) can lead to better health. In a study conducted by Harvard University, a group of hotel workers was told that their daily work fulfilled recommended exercise guidelines. A second group – the control group – was not given this information. After just one month, people in the informed group showed significant health improvements, including a ten point drop in [systolic blood pressure](#) and two pound weight loss (0.9kg). Waist-to-hip ratio also improved, as did [body mass index](#). All of these changes were significantly greater than the changes in the [control group](#).

Meta-stress

It is a commonly held belief that [stress](#) is bad for you, but the evidence is not clear cut. For example, a 2016 UK study of over [700,000 women](#), found that self-reported levels of stress had no direct effect on mortality.

Similar to what has been found with activity levels, how you perceive or think about stress may be as big a problem as stress itself. A number of studies seem to support this idea.

In a [large study](#), spanning nine years, researchers explored the role of stress and its impact on health and mortality. In this study, the researchers not only explored people's levels of stress, but also their beliefs about stress being dangerous for their health.

The results showed that neither high amounts of stress nor the perception that stress has a negative effect on health were independently associated

with premature death. However, people who both believed that stress affects health and reported a large amount of stress had a 43% increased risk of premature death. The authors concluded: "The results suggest that the appraisal of both the amount of stress and its impact on health may work together synergistically to increase the risk of [premature death](#)."

Interestingly, those who reported high levels of stress but who did not believe their stress was harmful, had the lowest mortality rates, even compared with those who had less stress.

New year, new mindset

What links both these areas of research is the idea that your mindset may be very important in influencing both the positive and negative effects of stress and exercise. So how can you change your mindset?

A starting point with exercise is to give up worrying how much physical activity you are doing compared with others. This is particularly important if your comparisons are based on unrealistically high standards, such as those often portrayed on social media.

Follow public health guidelines on appropriate levels of physical activity, but remember to praise yourself for the exercise and activity you do do, and don't punish yourself for the [exercise](#) you don't do. This may increase your motivation and provide a range of physical health benefits – as with the hotel workers.

With regards to stress, you need to stop thinking of [psychological stress](#) as being directly dangerous, particularly if you are stressed, as it is the relationship between stress and its perceived effect on health that increases mortality. When people worry about stress being dangerous, it can lead to a range of behaviours that can be much more dangerous, such as smoking, binge eating and excessive alcohol consumption.

Two approaches may be helpful here: first, don't worry about stress being bad for you. Worry only heightens a sense of threat and strengthens the belief that stress is dangerous. By choosing not to worry, you can greatly reduce any stress you may have about stress. This may also reduce your desire to engage in unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Second, accept stress as a normal part of life and a natural survival mechanism for dealing with threats. It has been shown that when people shift to seeing [stress as enhancing](#) rather than debilitating, it can result in more positive outcomes.

A change in perception and a reduction in worry may be a beneficial goal we can all achieve.

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