

To help beat heart disease, stay upbeat

September 13 2018, by Alan Mozes, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Optimism and a sense of purpose can improve your heart health, new research suggests.

Psychological well-being has cardiovascular benefits because people with a positive outlook are more inclined to lead a healthy lifestyle, the researchers concluded.

Upbeat people are more likely to eat well, engage in physical activity, maintain social connections and avoid negative behaviors, prior research has shown.

This new analysis "integrates a lot of different ways in which positive well-being might affect health through what we do—like exercising, eating healthy, avoiding harmful substances, and going to the doctor," said William Chopik, an assistant professor of psychology at Michigan State University.

The study authors report that positive well-being also influences how someone manages stress. That, in turn, might affect your physiological systems, added Chopik, who wasn't involved in the study.

For the study, Laura Kubzansky, of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and colleagues pored over dozens of investigations involving hundreds of thousands of participants.

The trials had explored the various ways that [psychological well-being](#) might boost cardiovascular health, or the reverse—the detrimental impact of depression, anxiety, anger, post-traumatic stress, and/or chronic stress.

Chopik characterized the review as a "comprehensive" and "rare" examination of the profound ways in which optimism can affect one's health.

The researchers highlighted the findings of a 2017 study, which showed that older women who rank among the top 25 percent in terms of

optimism are almost 40 percent less likely to die from heart disease.

A number of other studies demonstrated that people who believe they have a "higher purpose in life" face a considerably lower stroke risk.

Additional research revealed that the most optimistic people are more likely to kick a smoking habit, more likely to exercise regularly, and more likely to avoid obesity by adhering to a diet that favors fruits and vegetables over processed meat and sugary foods.

In addition, "mindfulness programs"—involving meditation, yoga and/or tai chi—can help boost optimism by reducing anxiety and stress, while boosting quality of life, the study authors said.

And some people who engage in those programs may see their [heart health](#) improve in terms of [lower blood pressure](#) and a lower overall risk for heart failure.

Kit Yarrow, a professor emeritus of psychology at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, was not involved with the new report but endorsed the findings.

"There is only an upside to developing a deeper understanding of how our psychology contributes to our physical health, and vice versa," she said.

"I'm not at all surprised by these findings, and I'm greatly relieved to see new research that supports how powerfully linked our body is with our mind," she added.

Yarrow noted, for example, that "emotionally positive and optimistic people not only feel compelled to take better care of themselves, they are also less likely to suffer from the physically damaging effects of

stress."

That can be a big plus, she said, given that [stress](#) is known to interfere with sleep, give rise to muscle tension and pain, and siphon off reservoirs of physical and mental energy.

"I also think this opens up wellness practices to people who may have previously felt uncomfortable caring for themselves emotionally," Yarrow added. "There are plenty who feel a focus on mental well-being is too self-centered, or an indication that they're 'crazy,' or something too time-consuming to add to their lives."

Perhaps this study will help to persuade them, she suggested. "There are really wonderful, step-oriented programs out there that anyone can follow," she said.

The study results were published online Sept. 10 in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*.

More information: William J. Chopik, Ph.D., assistant professor, psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.; Kit Yarrow, Ph.D., professor emeritus, psychology, Golden Gate University, San Francisco; Sept. 10, 2018, *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, online

There's more on stress and heart health at the [American Heart Association](#).

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Citation: To help beat heart disease, stay upbeat (2018, September 13) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-heart-disease-upbeat.html>

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