

The happiness dividend: Longer, healthier lives

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(HealthDay)—Happiness may truly be some of the best medicine

available to us, a new study suggests.

People happy with themselves and their well-being tend to live longer and healthier lives than those who are perpetually down in the dumps, British researchers report.

Women in their 50s who reported enjoying their lives had a projected live expectancy of nearly 37 more years, compared with just 31 years in those who felt depressed and unhappy in their lives, according to researchers with University College London.

The same went for men in their 50s—guys who were happy had a [life expectancy](#) of 33 more years, compared with about 27 years for miserable men.

Happier men and women also tended to age more gracefully and enjoy more years free from disability or chronic disease, the investigators found.

The new study is "one of many that are pointing in the same general direction, that people who are happier and more optimistic and have a higher degree of [life](#) satisfaction, they tend to be healthier and they tend to live longer," said James Maddux, a professor emeritus of clinical psychology with George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. He had no role in the study.

The study results were published online July 10 in *JAMA Network Open*. For the study, the researchers analyzed survey data from nearly 9,800 participants in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. The information was collected between 2002 and 2013, and average age was 64.

The team specifically looked at each participant's report of "subjective

well-being"—essentially, how much they are enjoying their life and how they feel about their own [health](#) and mood.

Nancy Mramor, a psychologist in Pittsburgh who specializes in health, stress and wellness, said, "It's the perception of how well you are, not the actual fact of how well you are." Mramor wasn't involved in the study.

The researchers then tracked participants to see how well their sense of their own well-being jibed with their actual health.

People with a more positive outlook not only tacked more years onto their life, they also tended to enjoy better health, the results showed.

For example, 50-year-old men completely happy with their lives could expect to live nearly 30 more years free from disability and 21 years free from chronic disease. That compared with 20 and 11 years, respectively, for depressed men who aren't enjoying life.

Women at age 50 who enjoy life can expect to live more than 31 years free from disability and 22 years free from chronic disease, compared with about 21 years and 12 years for those who are unhappy and depressed.

The health advantage associated with a [positive outlook](#) persisted as folks grew older. At ages 60, 70 and 80, those with a high enjoyment of life and no depression lived longer and healthier than those who didn't.

There's no clear explanation yet for why this association between happiness and health exists, the experts said. And the study does not prove cause and effect.

One possibility is that a constant state of unhappiness produces a lot of stress, Mramor said.

"Automatic negative thoughts create a stress response in the nervous system, which creates wear and tear on the body," Mramor said. "When you're thinking I'm in great health, even when you're not, you're sending all these positive signals to the body. There's evidence that freedom from stress takes a heavy burden off your body."

It's also possible that folks who are happier just tend to lead healthier lives, Maddux said.

"Happier people have something to live for," Maddux said. "They like their lives, and so they tend to take care of themselves more than people who are miserable."

People can change their outlook on life if they want, Mramor and Maddux agreed.

Mramor said, "You can definitely retrain your thinking. But you have to recognize there's a need for it, and you have to have a desire to do it."

Cognitive behavioral therapy and psychotherapy can help adults adjust the way they view their lives and respond to stress, Maddux said.

It's even better if, as children, we are taught how to manage our stress and focus on the pleasures in life, Mramor said.

"It's much harder to change long-held negative or pessimistic beliefs than it is to train positive ones in the first place," said Mramor, who teaches [stress](#) management techniques to children. "The younger you start, the quicker they learn and the more deeply those patterns of thought become embedded. It can take six months in adults what I can accomplish with children in six weeks."

However, there's no guarantee that changing your outlook will lengthen

your healthy life span. Maddux noted that genetics also plays a strong role in whether you are upbeat or downcast.

"It could be the same genetic ingredients that produce people who are generally happy and optimistic and upbeat also maybe programs their bodies to live longer and healthier," Maddux said.

More information: The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health has more about [happiness and health](#).

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