

Pathways linking childhood stressors and socioeconomic status to longevity (Update)

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After years of generalized theories and hypothesis, research has finally pinpointed certain aspects of childhood experience linked to people living longer.

Individuals raised in families with higher [socioeconomic status](#) were more optimistic in [midlife](#), and in turn, lived longer. Those who experienced more psychosocial [stressors](#), such as parental death, frequent moves and harsh discipline, tended to encounter more stressful life events in midlife, and had greater risk of dying.

Prior research has shown that [adverse childhood experiences](#) are associated with higher mortality risk. However, the effects appear to be driven by a small proportion of individuals who experienced multiple "hits" of severe stressors, such as physical abuse and domestic violence. Little is known about the potential effects of milder but more common stressors and the potential benefits of favorable [childhood](#) experiences on longevity. How different aspects of childhood experiences come to influence life span has rarely been studied. These questions are addressed in a new study in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

The study involved 1,042 men who had been followed since 1961 in the Normative Aging Study. Three aspects of childhood experiences, including socioeconomic status, psychosocial stressors and presence of close relationships were assessed at study entry and in 1995. Optimism, [life satisfaction](#), [stressful life events](#) and negative affect in midlife were assessed from 1985-91. Mortality status was tracked through 2016.

A key finding was that men who recalled having more childhood stressors also tended to experience more stressors as adults, and in turn, had greater risk of dying. For example, when comparing men who had five versus one childhood psychosocial stressors, those with more childhood stressors had a three percent greater risk of dying that was due to having more adulthood stressors. These findings suggest that a continuous pattern of stressor exposure from childhood to midlife may act as a precursor to reduced lifespan.

The researchers also looked at whether and how favorable aspects of

childhood experiences may contribute to longevity. In particular, men raised in families with higher socioeconomic status tended to report higher levels of optimism and life satisfaction in midlife, and in turn, had greater likelihood of having longer lives. These findings suggest that optimism and life satisfaction are resilience pathways which convey the benefits of childhood socioeconomic resources onto longer lives.

"Our findings offer novel evidence on unique and shared pathways linking specific dimensions of early life experiences to longevity," said corresponding author Lewina Lee, Ph.D., clinical research psychologist at the National Center for PTSD at VA Boston and assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. "We hope that our research will stimulate further work to identify and intervene on factors which lie on the pathways linking childhood experiences to later-life health."

More information: Lewina O. Lee et al, The long arm of childhood experiences on longevity: Testing midlife vulnerability and resilience pathways., *Psychology and Aging* (2019). DOI: [10.1037/pag0000394](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000394)

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