

To stay positive, live in the moment—but plan ahead

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A recent study from North Carolina State University finds that people who manage to balance living in the moment with planning for the future are best able to weather daily stress without succumbing to negative

moods.

"It's well established that daily stressors can make us more likely to have [negative affect](#), or bad moods," says Shevaun Neupert, a professor of psychology at NC State and corresponding author of a paper on the recent work. "Our work here sheds additional light on which variables influence how we respond to [daily stress](#)."

Specifically, the researchers looked at two factors that are thought to influence how we handle stress: mindfulness and proactive coping.

Mindfulness is when people are centered and living in the moment, rather than dwelling in the past or worrying about the future. Proactive coping is when people engage in planning to reduce the likelihood of future stress.

To see how these factors influence responses to stress, the researchers looked at data from 223 study participants. The study included 116 people between the ages of 60 and 90, and 107 people between the ages of 18 and 36. All of the study participants were in the United States.

All of the study participants were asked to complete an initial survey in order to establish their tendency to engage in proactive coping. Participants were then asked to complete questionnaires for eight consecutive days that explored fluctuations in mindfulness. On those eight days, participants were also asked to report daily stressors and the extent to which they experienced negative mood.

The researchers found that engaging in proactive coping was beneficial at limiting the effect of daily stressors, but that this advantage essentially disappeared on days when a participant reported low mindfulness.

"Our results show that a combination of proactive coping and high

mindfulness result in study participants of all ages being more resilient against [daily stressors](#)," Neupert says. "Basically, we found that proactive planning and mindfulness account for about a quarter of the variance in how [stressors](#) influenced negative affect.

"Interventions targeting daily fluctuations in mindfulness may be especially helpful for those who are high in proactive coping and may be more inclined to think ahead to the future at the expense of remaining in the present."

The paper, "Thinking Ahead and Staying in the Present: Implications for Reactivity to Daily Stressors," is published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. First author of the paper is Melody Polk, an undergraduate at NC State. The paper was co-authored by Emily Smith and Ling-Rui Zhang, graduate students at NC State. The work was done with support from NC State's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

More information: Melody G. Polk et al, Thinking ahead and staying in the present: Implications for reactivity to daily stressors, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2020.109971](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109971)

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