

# Study finds high life satisfaction linked to better overall health

March 3 2021

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New research from UBC finds that higher life satisfaction is associated with better physical, psychological and behavioral health.

The research, published recently in *The Milbank Quarterly*, found that higher life satisfaction is linked to 21 positive [health](#) and well-being

outcomes including:

- a 26 per cent reduced risk of mortality
- a 46 per cent reduced risk of depression
- a 25 per cent reduced risk of physical functioning limitations
- a 12 per cent reduced risk of chronic pain
- a 14 per cent reduced risk of sleep problem onset
- an eight per cent higher likelihood of frequent physical activity
- better psychological well-being on several indicators including higher: positive affect, optimism, purpose in life, and mastery—as well as lower: hopelessness, negative affect, perceived constraints, and loneliness

Dr. Eric Kim and his team examined data from a nationally representative sample of 12,998 U.S. adults over age 50, in which participants were asked to self-evaluate their life satisfaction and health.

This study is the first to see whether a positive change in life satisfaction is associated with better outcomes on a wide range of physical, behavioral and psychosocial health and well-being indicators over a four-year period.

"Life satisfaction is a person's evaluation of his or her own life based on factors that they deem most relevant," says Dr. Kim, an assistant professor in UBC's psychology department and lead author of the study. "While life satisfaction is shaped by genetics, social factors and changing life circumstances, it can also be improved on both the individual level as well as collectively on the national level."

Dr. Kim says in recent years, intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization have urged countries to use well-being indicators in addition to traditional economic indicators, like GDP, when making [policy decisions](#).

"The results of this study suggest that life satisfaction is a valuable target for policymakers to consider when enhancing physical, psychological and behavioral health outcomes at the policy level," says Dr. Kim.

The researchers decided to examine a four-year time period as there is emerging evidence that indicates changing levels of life satisfaction is an important determinant of voting behavior. Further, election cycles happen approximately every four years in many countries.

"It is in the interest of policymakers' election and reelection campaigns to consider how life satisfaction can be improved," says Dr. Kim. "But more importantly understanding what the downstream health and well-being effects of altering life [satisfaction](#) might be for populations over a four-year period is critical to evaluate, and this is precisely the kind of question we tried to answer in our study."

Dr. Kim says policy-makers who are interested in looking for practical ideas on how to improve [life satisfaction](#) at the policy level can look to the Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report, which is generated out of a broader UN initiative co-led by UBC economics professor emeritus Dr. John Helliwell and Columbia University professor Dr. Jeffrey Sachs.

"As our nations pause and reevaluate our priorities in light of the widespread change caused by COVID-19, our policymakers have a rare and excellent opportunity to pursue well-being for all in the post-pandemic world."

**More information:** ERIC S. KIM et al, Life Satisfaction and Subsequent Physical, Behavioral, and Psychosocial Health in Older Adults, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12497](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12497)

Provided by University of British Columbia

Citation: Study finds high life satisfaction linked to better overall health (2021, March 3)  
retrieved 16 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-high-life-satisfaction-linked-health.html>

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