

Study: Supportive later-life social relationships mediate frailty risk in adults who had negative childhood experiences

September 21 2023



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Frailty is a serious concern in later-life adults due to its association with additional health risks including disability, falls, hospitalization and

mortality. The prevalence of frailty has risen over time; about 15% of those aged 65 years and older are considered frail.

In one of the first studies to analyze the mediating effects of social relationships in the [relationship](#) between [childhood](#) experiences and frailty, Regenstrief Research Scientist Monica M. Williams-Farrelly, Ph.D., has found that negative childhood exposures can lead to lower levels of social support and social relationships, which can then lead to a higher likelihood of physical frailty in later life.

The paper is titled "Early Origins of Frailty: Do Later-Life Social Relationships Alter Trajectories of Decline?" and is published in the *Journal of Aging and Health*.

The researchers examined childhood experiences occurring before the age of 18, that were measured with responses to 29 questions, then categorized the responses into six childhood experience domains. The domains were socioeconomic status, risky parental behavior, risky adolescent behavior, childhood impairment, chronic disease in childhood and childhood infectious diseases.

Data from adults 65 years and older, who consented to physical measure testing during an enhanced face-to-face, in-home survey, was analyzed to determine the influence of the six domains of [childhood experiences](#) and social relationships on frailty trajectories over eight years.

"This study shows that if you experience some kind of unfortunate event in childhood, it is going to influence you in later life," said Dr. Williams-Farrelly. "But the good note is: If you also manage to cultivate and maintain good, supportive and strong [social relationships](#), that can help you reduce the relationship of negative experiences and potential higher likelihood of frailty."

Lead author Dr. Williams-Farrelly suggests the following for parents whose children may have suffered from a negative exposure.

"If you play a supportive role in your child's life and you know how to help your child cultivate good social skills and relationships, that should help to reduce the effects a negative childhood exposure may have on your child's health in later life."

One of the childhood experience domains, socioeconomic status, did not have a substantial effect on the relationship between negative childhood exposures and a higher likelihood of physical frailty in later life.

"It doesn't appear that there's a prominent relationship or difference between race or gender. But just because this paper doesn't appear to have a race effect doesn't mean it's not present," said Dr. Williams-Farrelly. "Similar to [socioeconomic status](#) (SES), in the childhood SES conversation, race is tied to a lot of systemic issues in the U.S., particularly for the [older adults](#) in this study. The older minorities in this population had to deal with Jim Crow laws and segregation as children. So just because you can't see a relationship in this study certainly doesn't mean it's not there."

Data for this study was collected as part of the University of Michigan Health and Retirement Study.

More information: Monica M. Williams-Farrelly et al, Early Origins of Frailty: Do Later-Life Social Relationships Alter Trajectories of Decline?, *Journal of Aging and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/08982643231185426](https://doi.org/10.1177/08982643231185426)

Provided by Regenstrief Institute

Citation: Study: Supportive later-life social relationships mediate frailty risk in adults who had negative childhood experiences (2023, September 21) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-09-later-life-social-relationships-frailty-adults.html>

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