

Study finds coping is related to longevity in older men

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Coping is defined as cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stressors that people believe exceed their ability and resources to respond to effectively. While previous research has linked stressor characteristics,

such as the type of event and its duration, and how stressed people feel in response to them, to higher mortality risk, far fewer studies have considered the long-term health consequences of how we manage stressors (coping) in large-scale studies.

In a new study from Boston University Chobanian & Avedisian School of Medicine, researchers have determined that in [older men](#), the overall effort put into coping was generally more important for longevity than the specific coping strategies used, or how stressful they considered the problem to be shortly after it had happened. These findings appear online in *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*.

"How much older men did in response to stressors mattered more for their survival than what they did. Our finding held up even after we considered individual differences in demographics, [marital status](#), major health conditions, and lifestyle factors at study baseline," said senior and corresponding author Lewina Lee, Ph.D., [clinical psychologist](#) at the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Boston Healthcare System and associate professor of psychiatry at the school.

"Studying coping is important because this is an aspect of the stress-health equation that is within our control yet it is very much overlooked."

The researchers followed 743 men who were part of the Veterans Affairs Normative Aging Study. Between 1993 and 2002, each man completed a stress and coping assessment that involved naming the most stressful thing that had happened to them in the past month, rating how stressful the problem was for them, and indicating how much they used specific strategies to deal with the problem.

The researchers then analyzed the data looking at the extent to which the

stressfulness of their problems, the specific types of coping strategies they used, and the overall effort put into coping related to the risk of dying over a span of 27 years.

According to the researchers, prior studies in psychological aging show that people gain tremendous expertise in coping with stressors across the life span. By the time they reach later life, people tend to be able use fewer coping strategies than younger adults while achieving the same level of success in managing difficult situations.

"Our findings suggest that if an older adult deviates from this pattern by using a lot of energy to deal with [stressors](#), it may be a sign that they are struggling and do not have what they need to manage the problem at hand," said first author Victoria Marino, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow at the school.

"These findings behoove us to pay more attention to how the [aging process](#) may pose challenges to individuals and to signs that older people may need resources to help preserve their health, sense of independence, and well-being," added Lee.

More information: Victoria R Marino et al, The Costs of Coping: Long-Term Mortality Risk in Aging Men, *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbae011](#)

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