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Having a higher purpose in life reduces risk of death among older adults

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Possessing a greater purpose in life is associated with lower mortality rates among older adults according to a new study by researchers at Rush University Medical Center. The study, published in journal, *Psychosomatic Medicine*.

Patricia A. Boyle, PhD, and her colleagues from the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center, studied 1,238 community-dwelling elderly participants from two ongoing research studies, the Rush Memory and Aging Project and the Minority Aging Research Study. None had dementia. Data from baseline evaluations of purpose in life and up to five years of follow-up were used to test the hypothesis that greater purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk of mortality among community-dwelling older persons.

Purpose in life reflects the tendency to derive meaning from life's experiences and be focused and intentional, according to Boyle.

After adjusting for age, sex, education and race, a higher purpose of life was associated with a substantially reduced risk of mortality. Thus, a person with high purpose in life was about half as likely to die over the follow-up period compared to a person with low purpose. The association of purpose in life with mortality did not differ among men and women or whites and blacks, and the finding persisted even after controlling for depressive symptoms, disability, neuroticism, the number of medical conditions and income. During the study period, 151 participants died.

"The finding that purpose in life is related to longevity in older persons suggests that aspects of human flourishing—particularly the tendency to derive meaning from life's experiences and possess a sense of intentionality and goal-directedness—contribute to successful aging," said Boyle.

Significant associations with mortality were found with three specific items on the purpose of life questionnaire to determine the study participants' agreement with the following statements: "I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life;" "I used to set goals for myself, but that now seems like a waste of time;" and "My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me."

"We are excited about these findings because they suggest that positive factors such as having a sense of purpose in life are important contributors to health," said Boyle.

The researchers note that knowledge of the relationship of purpose of life with other demographic characteristics is limited and future studies are needed to examine whether the association of purpose of life with mortality might be modified by other variables not measured in this study, such as how religious a participant may be. In addition, researchers suggest that future studies should examine whether purpose in life can be enhanced in older persons with interventions.

"Although we think that having a sense of purpose in life is important across the lifespan, measurement of purpose in life in older persons in particular may reveal an enduring sense of meaningfulness and intentionality in life that somehow provides a buffer against negative health outcomes," said Boyle.

The Rush Memory and Aging Project, which began in 1997, is a longitudinal clinical-pathological study of common chronic conditions of

aging. Participants are older persons recruited from about 40 continuous care retirement communities and senior subsidized housing facilities in and around the Chicago Metropolitan area. More than 1,200 older persons are enrolled in the study.

The Minority Aging Research Study began in 2004 and is a study of risk factors for cognitive decline in older Blacks. Participants are recruited from community-based organizations, churches, and senior subsidized housing facilities in and around the Chicago Metropolitan Area. More than 350 older persons are enrolled in the study.

Source: Rush University Medical Center (news : web)

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