

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2011

PARADE

THE SECRETS TO A LONG LIFE

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO GO THE DISTANCE?



So You Want to Live Longer?

Who doesn't? Now, thanks to the findings in an explosive new book, "The Longevity Project," you can finally learn why some people make it to old age--and others don't. A word of warning: Much of what you thought you knew was wrong!

By Howard S. Friedman, Ph.D., and Leslie R. Martin, Ph.D.

In September 1921, two schoolchildren named Patricia and John, along with 1,500 other youngsters, were pulled out of their California classrooms by a Stanford University psychologist named Lewis Terman and asked a series of questions. At age 91, Patricia and John were still alive and in good health. What was their secret? It wasn't a combo platter of broccoli, medical tests, vitamins, and jogging. Rather, these two people--and others like them who have lived well into old age--showed a certain constellation of habits and patterns of living. Their personalities, their careers, and their families were very much relevant to their health. These are the true guideposts to a long healthy life.

When studying longevity, one of the best ways to avoid research traps and biases is to follow individuals for their whole lives. By studying the 60 years of personal data collected in the Terman study and building on it with 20 years of our own research, we've discovered that many of the health recommendations you hear most frequently today are ill advised. Tracing the lives of the 1,500 people who participated in the Terman study, we discovered new twists to common health recommendations. We've identified a series of what we call dead-end myths: common advice about longevity that is not supported by good science. What follows are the common beliefs about healthy living that our research has shown to be false:

Myth No. 1: Lighthearted, carefree people are better off

When we started our research, we worried that perhaps nothing at all would accurately foretell long life. But our first significant finding put that concern to rest. The study clearly revealed that the best predictor of longevity in children was conscientiousness--the qualities of a well-organized person, somewhat obsessive and not at all carefree. Certain other factors were also relevant, but the prudent, dependable children lived the longest.

Conscientiousness also turned out to be the best predictor of long life when measured in adulthood. Adults who were thrifty, persistent, detail-oriented, and responsible lived the longest. Patricia, who was still healthy in her nineties, told the Terman team when she was a young adult that she enjoyed “planning her work in detail” and tended to “drive herself steadily.” Patricia was also “careful about making loans” and not at all impulsive.

There are three reasons conscientious people tend to stay healthier and live longer. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that conscientious people do more things to protect their health and engage in fewer risky activities, like smoking, drinking to excess, abusing drugs, or driving too fast. They are more likely to wear seatbelts and follow doctor’s orders. They are not necessarily risk-averse but they tend to be sensible in evaluating how far to push the envelope.

The second, and less obvious, reason for the health benefits of conscientiousness is that some people are biologically predisposed to have that personality trait. They are less prone to a whole host of diseases, not just those caused by dangerous habits. It appears likely that conscientious and unconscientious people have different levels of certain chemicals in their brains, including serotonin, the neurotransmitter targeted by antidepressant drugs like Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft. Individuals with low levels of serotonin tend to be much more impulsive. Importantly, serotonin is also necessary to regulate many health-relevant processes throughout the body, including how much you eat and how well you sleep.

We’ve saved the best for last. The most intriguing reason they live longer is that having a conscientious personality leads people into healthier situations and relationships. They find their way to happier marriages, better friendships, and healthier work situations. That’s right, conscientious people create long-life pathways for themselves.

Myth No. 2: Outgoing people are healthier

Americans tend to view being extroverted as desirable--we worry about children who are shy. But looking across the decades, sociable children did not live longer.

John, who was healthy into his nineties, was a shy child who tried to avoid playing in large groups; he preferred chess and checkers to tag or charades. He later became a physicist. It was a common pattern: the Terman study

participants who would go on to become scientists were much less sociable than those who became lawyers, businessmen, and salesmen. The two groups were about equal on the trait of conscientiousness—that was not it. So why didn't sociability necessarily set one on a path to long life? After all, the outgoing children grew up to be adults who had better social relations, and that is normally a sign of good health. Right?

It turns out the shy scientists had the ace in the hole: They tended to move into stable jobs, have long-lasting marriages, and generally work in a responsible manner. The non-scientists—that is, the businessmen, lawyers, and salesmen—tended to have more tumultuous, less stable, and more health-damaging behaviors. Highly sociable people can be leaders in their fields because of their enthusiasm, emotional connectedness and charm. But they are also more likely to go along with social pressures toward drinking and smoking. A “people person” sometimes joins in the dangers of the moment. These tendencies affect longevity.

Myth No. 3: Think happy thoughts to live to 100

Many people in our culture peddle the idea that happiness, optimism and good cheer are the secrets to good health. If true, then when you become ill, you could adopt a positive attitude and recover. When we studied our data stretching over the decades, we found one of the biggest bombshells of our entire project: cheerful and optimistic children were less likely to live to an old age than their more staid and sober counterparts!

Many people believe happiness leads to health because the two often appear to go hand in hand. But that does not mean that the happiness is the direct cause of good health. This distinction is tremendously important. A significant health downside to optimism involves overlooking or ignoring real threats—sometimes called illusory optimism. Happy and optimistic people may underestimate risks to their health and thereby fail to take precautions or to follow medical advice.

So is it OK to worry? That answer is complicated. We found that the Terman women who were worriers in young adulthood went on to later report being sicker and unhappier; and they were more likely to die at a younger age. This was especially true if they were not conscientious. For men the results were dramatically different! The Terman men who were worriers in young adulthood went on to later report being sicker and unhappier on average, but they were less likely to die. If the neurotic individuals were also conscientious, the

result was even stronger. The men who were conscientious and neurotic did quite well as they aged. Rather than fretting themselves to death, they were concerned enough to keep themselves alive.

Myth No. 4: Get married to live longer

The first flaw in this advice becomes apparent with a close reading of the existing scientific studies. It turns out that the studies show that it is not married people who live longer but married men. The bulk of the evidence in various studies does not show much, if any, advantage for married women.

With men, the key appears to be divorce. This is the second most serious source of stress in any person's life, following the death of a mate or child. We found that divorced Terman men were at a much higher mortality risk. The steadily married men were likely to live to age 70 and beyond, but the divorced men were very unlikely to reach old age--fewer than a third did so! With men, the strain of divorce harms them directly and also sets in motion a series of other unhealthy behaviors and patterns.

When studying marriage, the women in the Terman study showed fascinating results. Like their male counterparts, steadily married women lived somewhat longer lives than those women who had divorced and then remarried. The surprise emerged for women who had gotten divorced and not remarried. These women usually lived long lives. Being divorced was much less harmful to women's health than men's.

What to make of these findings? First of all, if you are a single woman with a number of friends and an interesting life, don't think you need to get married (or remarried) to improve health. Married men do live longer but usually only if they are suited to a lasting marriage and they do not divorce.

Myth No. 5: Education is the key to good health

There were many surprises in the area of schooling. When the Terman participants were children, it was more common for parents to enroll their youngsters in school early. But we found a direct correlation—a negative one—with this type of getting-a-head-start enrollment. The children who started first grade at age 5 were at higher risk of dying early, and those who started on schedule (age 6) lived longer. One theory is that developing brains need a certain amount of unstructured playtime to thrive.

As for higher education, we found that level of schooling by itself was not a very good predictor of longevity. The better educated tended to be healthier and live a little longer. But much more relevant was productivity and persistence in the face of challenges than the number of degrees.

Myth No. 5: Take it easy and don't work so hard

"Relax," "Avoid stress," "Take time off"--these are the ways to get healthier, right? Wrong. There is little or no evidence that the challenges of daily life on the job suppress the immune system and thereby cause significant numbers of people to die from cancer and other immune-related diseases. Similarly, there is no evidence that people who work long hours are more prone to heart disease.

After studying the connections between health and work, the results were clear. Those with the most career success were the least likely to die young. Conscientiousness is a strong predictor of longevity and it turns out that the professionally successful Terman subjects were indeed more conscientious than their peers. But that personality trait didn't explain everything. Ambition, coupled with perseverance, impulse control, and high motivation was part of the package of the resilient work life. Usually such increased responsibility brings more challenges and a heavier workload, but paradoxically this is helpful to long-term health.

What about the oldest participants? The findings here were dramatic. Continually productive men and women lived much longer than their laid-back comrades. This mattered more than their social relationships or their sense of happiness. So think carefully about retirement plans. Giving up an interesting, demanding job to retire and move away from your friends to live in a golf community could actually increase the risk to your health!

There are a few things that everyone agrees damage your health. First is ingesting toxins, such as cigarette smoke, lead and pesticides. The second is too much exposure to radioactivity. The third are virulent infectious diseases. But after you eliminate these factors--and traumatic accidents--and things get complicated. Which foods to eat, which medications to take, which screenings to ask for, how much exercise you need--these are all relevant questions but hard to sort out.

The lives of the Terman study subjects teach us that it is not enough to examine our bodies. We must look at

personality, our attitudes toward work and family. It was not those who were the most popular and cheerful who made it to the oldest age. It was also not those who took life easy or avoided stress. Rather it was those who--through an often-complex pattern of persistence, prudence, hard work and close involvement with friends and communities--headed down meaningful, interesting life paths and, each time they were pushed off the paths, found a way right back on.

Any Regrets?

When asked, elderly study participants most lamented the opportunities lost, the roads not taken, more than regretting any actions they had taken.

Exercise Reality

Being active in middle age was most important to longevity. If a child or teenager loved exercise but became sedentary in middle age, it did not extend life. But a couch-potato child who became active in midlife and stayed that way reaped the full longevity benefits.