

The Power of Positivity – How Avoiding Negativity Can Lead to a Longer Life

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Embracing optimism and avoiding negative thinking patterns can significantly impact overall well-being and longevity. Studies highlight a positive mindset as a key factor in health and cognitive function
- › Recent research links stress to reduced cognitive reserve, potentially impacting brain health and life span. Cognitive reserve, built through mental stimulation, helps maintain brain function despite age-related changes
- › Chronically high cortisol levels from stress can harm your health by increasing inflammation, impairing immunity and accelerating aging. Managing stress is crucial for maintaining cognitive reserve
- › Mindfulness meditation effectively lowers cortisol and stress levels. It can be integrated into daily activities, facilitating optimism and contributing to overall brain health and slower cognitive decline
- › Studies show optimism is linked to longer life and better physical functioning in aging. Women with higher optimism tend to live longer and maintain better physical abilities

With the everyday stressors and challenges you encounter, it's easy to fall into the patterns of negative thinking. However, doing so affects not just your mood but also your overall well-being. The profound impact of mental outlook on health has long been well-established, with studies highlighting positive mindset as one of the most influential factors in longevity.¹

A January 2024 study² published in the journal *Alzheimer's & Dementia* sheds new light on the link between stress and long-term brain health. While it focused on patients with cognitive damage, its findings underscore an important point – your mental state, particularly the increased stress associated with negative thinking, can significantly impact your cognitive abilities and potentially your life span.

Stress Chips Away at Your 'Cognitive Reserve'

The featured study,³ conducted by researchers from Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, involved 113 participants from the larger Cortisol and Stress in Alzheimer's Disease (Co-STAR) cohort study, which examined the impact of stress and lifestyle among patients at the memory clinic of Karolinska University Hospital. This time, the authors sought to determine the relationship between stress, cognitive reserve and the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Cognitive reserve is a concept that originated from a late 1980s study, referring to the brain's ability to maintain function despite having signs of cognitive damage or age-related changes. It's thought to be built up through lifelong mental and social stimulation, such as education, complex work and engaging in cognitive activities. People with higher cognitive reserve may be able to cope better with brain changes associated with diseases like Alzheimer's.⁴

The participants in the featured study⁵ underwent various assessments, including cognitive tests to evaluate their memory and mental function, a questionnaire to determine perceived stress, measurements of salivary cortisol levels to assess physiological stress and an analysis of cerebrospinal fluid for the markers of Alzheimer's disease (amyloid beta and tau proteins).

Moreover, the researchers created a Cognitive Reserve Index (CRI) for each participant. This index considered their education, job complexity, physical and leisure activities and social interactions to measure their brain's resilience against aging and disease. The results of the study highlighted four key findings:

"First, a higher CRI score (protective condition) was associated with better global cognition, particularly in the domains of processing speed, working memory and perceptual reasoning. Second, diurnal salivary cortisol patterns, which serve as physiological markers of stress, appear to reduce the beneficial influence of high CRI on cognitive performance.

Third, there was evidence for interaction between CRI and the cortisol AM/PM ratio in relation to working memory, such that a higher CRI was associated with better working memory in memory clinic patients with a favorable AM/PM ratio alone.

Fourth, there was no association between CRI and [Alzheimer's disease]-related CSF biomarkers in the full analytical sample. However, there was an indication of cortisol awakening ratio and age playing potential modifying roles in the relation between [cognitive reserve] and tau pathology."

Chronically Elevated Cortisol Levels Can Harm Your Health

Cortisol is a stress hormone, and while it's crucial for survival, it can take a significant toll on your health when it's chronically elevated. As such, the key take-home from the study⁶ is that stress management is important to avoid having persistently high cortisol levels, which can undermine the cognitive reserve you have built over your lifetime.

However, the negative effects of cortisol extend beyond cognitive issues. Cortisol helps raise low blood sugar by breaking down muscles, bones and brain tissue to release amino acids, which the liver converts to glucose in a process called gluconeogenesis. So, ultimately, chronically elevated cortisol will increase inflammation and impair your immune function.

Cortisol is also known as the primary aging hormone. When it stays elevated, it can cause premature death because it is highly catabolic, meaning it breaks down tissues. In a previous interview with Georgi Dinkov, who is an expert on the work of the late Ray

Peat, Ph.D.,⁷ an author and pioneer in nutrition, bioenergetic medicine, environmental factors and regenerative processes, he commented:

"I think there's hardly a chronic condition where you don't see cortisol implicated, and usually, in the majority of cases, it is elevated cortisol, not low cortisol. In fact, the only situation in which low cortisol becomes problematic is probably Addison's disease, which is adrenal failure. And that's very rare."

To stay healthy as you age, you need to be anabolic, which means building healthy tissues like muscle and mitochondria. High cortisol levels can significantly hinder these processes. To learn more about the negative effects of chronically elevated cortisol on health, check out my previous article, "[Important Information About Low Carb, Cortisol and Glucose.](#)"

Mindfulness Meditation Helps Lower Cortisol and Stress Levels

One simple, inexpensive tool to manage your cortisol levels and support your body's anabolic processes is practicing mindfulness and meditation for stress relief. In an article by The Conversation, the study's lead author Manasa Shanta Yerramalla, researcher at the Department of Neurobiology, Care Sciences and Society at Karolinska Institutet, explained:⁸

"Higher chronic stress may lessen the cognitive advantages of stimulating activities and enriching experiences in later life. Adding stress management techniques, such as mindfulness and meditation into your daily routine may contribute to overall brain health and slow cognitive decline."

Practicing "mindfulness" means living in the present and actively paying attention to the moment you're in, rather than letting your mind wander. This state of mind allows you to let distracting thoughts pass through without getting caught up in their emotional implications. You can integrate mindfulness into various everyday activities, such as when eating, working or doing household chores, by simply tuning into the sensations you're experiencing at that moment.

One study⁹ published in *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, which sought to determine the effects of mindfulness meditation on cortisol levels, perceived stress and inflammatory markers in nursing students, found that this strategy is "significantly effective" for lowering serum cortisol levels and perceived stress.

Mindfulness also facilitates optimism. A paper¹⁰ published in *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* found that being mindful can increase the positive effect of optimism, particularly when focusing on tasks, with the researchers highlighting that "it is best to be both optimistic and mindful." For tips on how to practice mindfulness meditation, read my article, "[Meditation Actually Alleviates Stress](#)."

More Studies Support the Benefits of Optimism on Longevity

According to Dr. Hayami Koga, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies and the lead author of an October 2022 study¹¹ on the link between optimism, lifestyle and longevity, optimism is generally defined as the "expectation that good things will happen, or believing the future will be favorable because we can control important outcomes."¹²

Their study,¹³ which involved 159,255 women from the Women's Health Initiative, showed that higher levels of optimism were linked to a longer life span. For example, women with the highest optimism tended to live about 5.4% longer than those with the lowest optimism levels.

"Higher optimism was associated with longer life span and a greater likelihood of achieving exceptional longevity overall and across racial and ethnic groups. The contribution of lifestyle to these associations was modest. Optimism may promote health and longevity in diverse racial and ethnic groups," the authors wrote.

Koga also participated in another study¹⁴ published March 2024 in *JAMA Psychiatry*, which aimed to determine the link between optimism and age-related changes in

physical abilities. They studied 5,930 postmenopausal women and initially found that those who were more optimistic had stronger grips and could do more chair stands.

After a 6-year follow-up, they saw that women with higher optimism showed less decline in how fast they could walk and in how many chair stands they could do compared to less optimistic women. "Optimism may be a promising target for interventions to slow age-related decline in physical functioning," they concluded.

How to Cultivate Positive Thinking

Optimism can be inherent for some, but it's also a skill that you can cultivate. Dr. Sue Varma, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University and author of "Practical Optimism: The Art, Science, and Practice of Exceptional Well-Being," wrote in an NPR article:¹⁵

"Even if you were not born with this natural disposition to anticipate favorable outcomes and see the glass as half full, there are skills that you can learn.

Begin by noticing how you deal with uncertainty. Do you tend to worry? Assume the worst? Try to reframe the thought in an objective manner. 'Is there a silver lining? Is this a problem to be solved or a truth to be accepted?'"

If you're dealing with a problem, Varma advised visualizing the best possible outcome and mapping out a detailed step-by-step path to achieve it. This approach fosters positive behavior, resilience and the ability to bounce back from challenges.

Finding a sense of purpose and volunteering when you can may also help, but if you don't have the time, Varma suggests making changes with your role at work to better fit your interests. This could be as simple as organizing outings with your colleagues to promote socialization.

Mastering a new skill, whether in sports, music, languages or other hobbies, can also help distract you from negative thoughts. "Even with these and other interventions, it's not easy to change your mindset, but practice helps," Varma noted. "It's a toolset, it's a mindset. I have to practice it every day in my mind."

Enhance Your Health With Anticipatory Joy

Have you ever experienced the delightful sense of eager anticipation before a positive event, such as a vacation, holiday or even a simple, enjoyable meal? This feeling is captured by the German term "vorfreude." Rachel Dixon explores this concept in an article for The Guardian,¹⁶ discussing how you can cultivate it to fully enjoy moments of Joy.

Dixon outlines 30 strategies to boost your vorfreude quotient according to experts, from simple daily practices like noting one joyful moment each day to establishing routines that give you something to look forward to regularly. For more insights on fostering anticipatory Joy in your life, read my article, "[Embrace Joy With Vorfreude.](#)"

Take Control of Your Mental Outlook

The power to improve your health by shaping your mental outlook and taking proactive steps to manage your negative emotions mirrors the principles in my upcoming book, "The Power of Choice."

Up until now, all my books, nearly all of which have become best-sellers, have focused purely on diet and lifestyle strategies for physical health and longevity. "The Power of Choice" is also, ultimately, about health, but approaches it from a different perspective — that of connection to your consciousness.

One of the key lessons from this book is that life is about creating Joy. You hold the ultimate authority over the experiences you encounter, as they are entirely shaped by your individual choices. If your life lacks fulfillment, then it could be your true Self telling you to make different choices that could steer you toward a more satisfying existence.

I intentionally capitalize "Self" and "Joy" to underscore their deeper, transcendent nature. Self represents unlimited, immortal consciousness, while Joy denotes a profound state of contentment that emanates from within yourself.

Remember that every moment presents an opportunity to choose Joy and foster a positive mindset. By cultivating optimism, practicing mindfulness and making conscious choices that align with your true Self, you're not just improving your mental state — you're potentially safeguarding your long-term cognitive health and longevity.

Sources and References

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