

The Ilk of Human Kindness

Older women with gumption score high on compassion

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Researchers at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine report that older women, plucky individuals and those who have suffered a recent major loss are more likely to be compassionate toward strangers than other older adults.

The study is published in this month's issue of the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*.

Because compassionate behaviors are associated with better health and well-being as we age, the research findings offer insights into ways to improve the outcomes of individuals whose deficits in compassion put them at risk for becoming lonely and isolated later in life.

"We are interested in anything that can help older people age more successfully," said Lisa Eyler, PhD, a professor of psychiatry and co-author. "We know that social connections are important to health and well-being, and we know that people who want to be kind to others garner greater social support. If we can foster compassion in people, we can improve their health and well-being, and maybe even longevity."

The study, based on a survey of 1,006 randomly selected adults in San Diego County, aged 50 and over, with a mean age of 77, identified three factors that were predictive of a person's self-reported compassion: gender, recent suffering and high mental resiliency.

Women, independent of their age, income, education, race, marital status or mental health status, scored higher on the compassion test, on average, than men. Higher levels of compassion were also observed among both men and women who had "walked a mile in another person's shoes" and experienced a personal loss, such as a death in the family or illness, in the last year.

Those who reported higher confidence in their ability to bounce back from hard times also reported more empathy toward strangers and joy from helping those in need.

"What is exciting is that we are identifying aspects of successful aging that we can foster in both men and women," said co-author Dilip Jeste, MD, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences, and director of the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging. "Mental

resiliency can be developed through meditation, mindfulness and stress reduction practices. We can also teach people that the silver lining to adversity is an opportunity for personal growth.”

Co-authors include Raeanne C. Moore, A'verria Sirkin Martin and Wesley Thompson, Department of Psychiatry and Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, UCSD; Allison Kaup, Sierra Pacific Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center, San Francisco VA Medical Center and Department of Psychiatry, UC San Francisco; Matthew Peters, Department of Psychiatry, The Johns Hopkins University; and Shahrokh Golshan, Department of Psychiatry, UCSD.

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