

## New Study Shows Successful Aging a Question of "Mind Over Matter"

*Results of Self-Reported Successful Aging Research Released at ACNP Annual Conference*

December 27, 2005 |

**A** new study released at the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology's (ACNP) Annual Meeting suggests that seniors' perception of their own aging process depends not on disease or physical disability, but rather on their attitude and coping style. This research, conducted at and funded by the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging (SIRA) at the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine, is unusual in employing subjective reports as a measure of successful aging.

"The medical community has not reached consensus on what constitutes successful aging," commented lead researcher and SIRA Director Dilip Jeste, M.D. Jeste holds the Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging and is also Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at UCSD. "The commonly used criteria suggest that a person is aging well if they have a low level of disease and disability. However, this study shows that self-perception about aging can be more important than the traditional success markers."

This study examined more than 500 older Americans, age 60 to 98, who live independently within the community (i.e., do not live in a nursing home or assisted care facility). Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire including medical, psychological and demographic information. The sample was representative of national averages with regard to incidence of medical conditions (e.g., heart disease, cancer, diabetes, etc.). Similarly, 20 to 25 percent of the respondents had been diagnosed with and/or received treatment for a mental health problem.

Despite the prevalence of physical illness and disabilities in the group, when study participants were asked to rate their own degree of successful aging on a ten-point scale (with 10 being "most successful"), their average rating was 8.4. Most of the respondents who gave themselves high ratings would not meet the criteria for successful aging as quantified by more traditional measures that include absence of disease and freedom from disability. In fact, fewer than ten percent of the participants would have met these standards proposed in a landmark work on successful aging which proposed criteria for successful aging that are widely used.

“What is most interesting about this study is that people who think they are aging well are not necessarily the healthiest individuals,” noted Jeste. “In fact, optimism and effective coping styles were found to be more important to aging successfully than traditional measures of health and wellness. These findings suggest that physical health is not the best indicator of successful aging – attitude is.”

Another strong indicator of successful aging was the level of social and community involvement. Participants who spent time each day on hobbies, such as reading and writing, or socializing with other members of the community consistently gave themselves higher scores. Participants who had a paid job outside of the home were also more likely to give themselves higher scores. Interestingly, volunteer activities were not found to exert the same influence on participants’ self-reports. Factors that were not correlated with high self-report ratings included age, gender, education, marital status and income.

“For most people, worries about their future aging involve fear of physical infirmity, disease or disability,” says Jeste. “However, this study is encouraging because it shows that the best predictors of successful aging are well within an individual’s control.”

When asked about the implications of the study and plans for future research, Jeste noted that the correlates of successful aging identified in this study should be examined in larger groups, and that the participants should be followed into the future to monitor how such perceptions affect their ongoing health. “Ultimately,” Jeste explained, “this information could lead to the development of a new model for successful aging that incorporates the perspectives of seniors themselves.”

*ACNP is holding its Annual Meeting December 11-15, 2005, in Waikoloa, Hawaii.*

*ACNP, founded in 1961, is a professional organization of more than 700 leading scientists, including three Nobel Laureates. The mission of ACNP is to further research and education in neuropsychopharmacology and related fields in the following ways: promoting the interaction of a broad range of scientific disciplines of brain and behavior in order to advance the understanding of prevention and treatment of disease of the nervous system including psychiatric, neurological, behavioral and addictive disorders; encouraging scientists to enter research careers in fields related to these disorders and their treatment; and ensuring the dissemination of relevant scientific advances. A non-profit organization, ACNP receives revenues from a variety of sources including membership dues, publication sales, registration fees, and pharmaceutical industry grants.*

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