Self-rating mental health as 'good' predicts positive future mental health

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Researchers have found that when a person rates their current mental health as 'positive' despite meeting criteria for a mental health problem such as depression, it can predict good mental health in the future, even without treatment.

Using data from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, Sirry Alang of Lehigh University and her co-authors, Donna D. McAlpine of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and Ellen McCreedy of Brown University, sampled people who met the criteria for having a mental health problem and examined differences between those who do and do not rate their own mental health as poor.

After examining whether self -rated mental health predicts later outcomes among persons with a mental health problem, they estimated the impact of self-rated mental health on later mental health for persons with a mental health problem who did not receive treatment.

Published this month in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the authors found that over 60% of people who screen positive for either depression or serious psychological distress rate their mental health as good.

However, the findings also showed that those who rated their mental health positively were significantly less likely to meet criteria for depression or serious psychological distress at follow-up one year later compared to those who rated their mental health more negatively, even if they did not receive treatment for a mental health problem.

"That means future mental health was better, even in the absence of treatment," explained Sirry Alang, assistant professor of sociology at Lehigh University and co-author of "The Meaning and Predictive Value of Self-rated Mental Health among Persons with a Mental Health Problem."

Alang and her colleagues were surprised to find that self-rated mental health had an independent positive impact on future mental health.

She noted that good mental health is not only the absence of symptoms or mental illness. It encompasses the ability to cope and adapt to life, fulfill desired roles, sustain meaningful relationships and maintain a sense of purpose and belonging in life.

"Self-rated mental health is a very powerful construct that can be useful in clinical practice if we consider it a potential screener for mental health. Positive ratings of mental health even in the face of symptoms might not be a result of denial but may offer valuable insights about a person's ability to cope with their symptoms."

The authors conclude that simply asking people how they rate their own mental health is a simple intervention that can be used to identify individuals who may most benefit from treatment.

Provided by Lehigh University

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