

Living a stress-free life may have benefits, but also a downside

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Stress is a universal human experience that almost everyone deals with from time to time. But a new study found that not only do some people report feeling no stress at all, but that there may be downsides to not experiencing stress.

The researchers found that people who reported experiencing no [stressors](#) were more likely to experience better daily well-being and fewer chronic health conditions. However, they were also more likely to have lower cognitive function, as well.

David M. Almeida, professor of human development and [family studies](#) at Penn State, said the study suggests that small, [daily stressors](#) could potentially benefit the brain, despite being an inconvenience.

"It's possible that experiencing stressors creates opportunities for you to solve a problem, for example, maybe fixing your computer that has suddenly broken down before an important Zoom meeting," Almeida said. "So experiencing these stressors may not be pleasant but they may force you to solve a problem, and this might actually be

good for cognitive functioning, especially as we grow older."

According to the researchers, a large number of previous studies have linked [stress](#) with a greater risk for many negative outcomes, like chronic illness or worse emotional wellbeing. But Almeida said that while it may make sense to believe that the less stress someone experiences the more healthy they will be, he said little research has explored that assumption.

"The assumption has always been that stress is bad," Almeida said. "I took a step back and thought, what about the people who report never having stress? My previous work has focused on people who have higher versus lower levels of stress, but I'd never questioned what it looks like if people experience no stress. Are they the healthiest of all?"

The researchers used data from 2,711 participants for the study. Prior to the start of the study, the participants completed a short cognition test. Then, the participants were interviewed each night for eight consecutive nights, and answered questions about their mood, chronic conditions they may have, their physical symptoms—such as headaches, coughs or sore throats—and what they did during that day.

The participants also reported the number of stressors—like disagreements with friends and family or a problem at work—and the number of positive experiences, such as sharing a laugh with someone at home or work, they had experienced in the previous 24 hours.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that there did appear to be benefits for those who reported no stressors throughout the study, about 10 percent of the participants. These participants were less likely to have chronic health conditions and experience better moods throughout the day.

However, those who reported no stressors also performed lower on the cognition test, with the difference equaling more than eight years of aging. Additionally, they were also less likely to report giving or receiving emotional support, as well as less likely to experience positive things happening throughout the day.

"I think there's an assumption that [negative events](#) and positive events are these polar opposites, but in reality they're correlated," Almeida said. "But really, I think experiencing small daily stressors like having an argument with somebody or having your computer break down or maybe being stuck in traffic, I think they might be a marker for someone who has a busy and maybe full life. Having some stress is just an indicator that you are engaged in life."

Almeida said the findings—recently published in the journal *Emotion*—suggest that it may not be as important to avoid stress as it is to change how you respond to stress.

"Stressors are events that create challenges in our lives," Almeida said. "And I think experiencing stressors is part of life. There could be potential benefits to that. I think what's important is how people respond to stressors. Responding to a stressor by being upset and worried is more unhealthy than the number of stressors you encounter."

More information: Susan T. Charles et al, The mixed benefits of a stressor-free life., *Emotion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000958](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000958)

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