



On the Run

Older Adults Deal Better with Stress

A Publication of: Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health - Penn State Gerontology Center - Penn State Cooperative Extension

If there's an advantage to getting older, it's that you're likely to be able to handle everyday stress better.

Older adults appear to do, on the average, a much better job of dealing with the daily stressors in life, says David M. Almeida, associate professor of human development and family studies in the College of Health and Human Development at Penn State.

"This may be due to a lifetime of having stressors and developing good strategies to deal with them," he said. "We also have some evidence that shows older adults are more in tune with their emotions than younger adults. If an older adult experiences a stressor and recognizes it has some emotional input, he or she is more likely to take steps to remedy the stressor. Younger adults aren't as good at regulating their emotions. They often let their emotions take over in stressful situations."

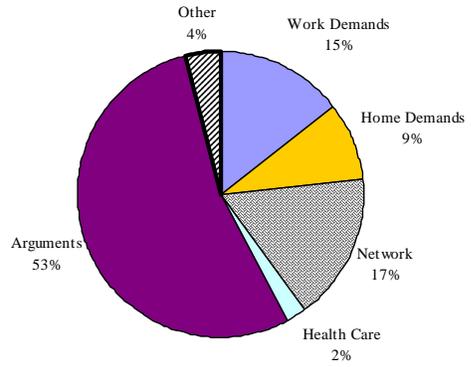
Almeida, who joined the Penn State faculty last fall from the University of Arizona, is a life-span developmental psychologist with a primary focus on stress and coping during middle adulthood. He is studying the health effects of everyday stressors of life such as arguing with your child, having a sick spouse or dealing with a deadline at work, in contrast to major life events such as marital disruption and job loss.

"I believe these daily minor frustrations and hassles have real health ramifications for adults," he said. "For example, our heart rate often increases when we are stuck in traffic. You often feel flush when you have an argument. This alters the body chemistry in some way and over time there are health implications in taxing the cardiovascular system. More interestingly, these stressors might interfere with your doing healthy things such as eating properly and exercising. In effect, you get a double whammy of stress."

Almeida is principal investigator of the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE), an eight-year project funded by the MacArthur Foundation and the National Institutes of Health and part of the MacArthur Foundation National Survey of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS). The project focused on telephone interviews with some 1,500 people between the ages of 25 and 74 across the country on eight consecutive nights to examine daily stressful experiences.

Many of the stressors identified in the large national study, such as arguments, work overload and financial issues, are naturally occurring stressors, Almeida said, noting that very few people don't have stressors. Only six percent of those interviewed said they had no stressors. Some reported they had stressors every day. Most reported they had noticeable stressors during forty percent of the eight-day period. With information from the study, researchers are able to chart the ebb and flow of the daily stressors and assess whether they match the ebb and flow of health experiences. They can determine whether people have more headaches, stomach aches and cold symptoms on days they have stressors compared to days they don't.

"Exposure and reactivity were the two processes we were particularly interested in," Almeida said. "Why, for example, when some



Types of Stressors

About the Author

David Almeida, Ph.D. is a lifespan developmental psychologist with a primary focus on stress and coping during middle adulthood. His research interests center on the general question of how daily experiences within the family and other social contexts, such as work and leisure, influence individual health and well-being. In contrast to research on major life events such as marital disruption and job loss, Almeida is interested in the health effects of everyday stressors and fulfillments such as work deadlines and family interactions.



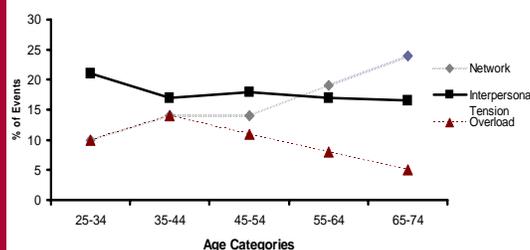
people face deadlines, it just slides off them. For others, deadlines cause emotional distress. They become agitated and have health problems as well.”

In a series of analyses with data produced in the project, researchers have found that younger individuals have more stressors and are more likely to report physical and emotional reactions to them.

“Younger individuals have more interpersonal tensions than older persons,” Almeida said. “In mid-life they have more overloads and demands. There is too much to do and too little time.”

Older individuals in the study—those age 60 and older—were more likely to have stressors that occur to other people in their lives, such as having a child with a problem or a spouse who is sick. The difficulties of the individual’s network of friends or close relatives affect their stress level.

Type of Stressful Event



Adults of all ages reported an awareness of the relationship between stressors and health, with many thinking of stressors in terms of the physical manifestation. “People are aware that stressors are coupled with health problems, but, with the wisdom of age, comes an awareness of how the environment is acting over you,” Almeida said. An older adult who has a

potential conflict with a salesperson, for example, is more likely to get out of the situation before it leads to a physical manifestation.

“The good news is that adults of all ages are doing things to deal with these everyday stressors,” he added. “We found that many make an effort to stay away from stressful situations. We see a decline in interpersonal tensions, which is evidence that people are choosing not to expose themselves to stressors. For those who have no choice, they can try to find ways to cope with them such as developing a network of people to provide help.”

Almeida, who himself has found life less stressful in State College, is continuing to utilize, with fellow researchers, NSDE data in a project examining self reports of health combined with actual biological measurement of health. With researchers in Penn State’s Department of Biobehavioral Health, he is looking into an assessment of change in body chemistry as the result of stressful situations.

“It is one thing to say stressful experiences make people feel bad,” he said, “but you don’t know if feeling bad leads to the stressors. A biological measurement gives a more objective indicator of health rather than relying on a personal response.”

Almeida and Lawrence Fisher of the University of California, San Francisco, serve as co-investigators of a National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases project to study the effects of daily stress and depressed mood on daily management of Type II diabetes. The researchers are looking at how daily stressors and mood predict glucose functioning directly and then develop ways for people to better manage their diabetes.

In another project, he and fellow researchers are doing a study on health and stress among married couples in their 70s and above. They specifically are looking at how the couples help each other in dealing with daily stressors.

Almeida, who is an associate professor at Penn State’s Gerontology Center, feels the study of middle life adults is important to the field of gerontology.

“Many of the determinants of issues in gerontology such as health and well-being might have taken place in middle adulthood,” he said. “The reason why some adults thrive in later life and others don’t is because of habits and lifestyles established in middle adulthood.”

For more information, contact the Penn State Gerontology Center at 814-865-1710, visit <http://geron.psu.edu/> or contact David Almeida, Ph.D. at 814-865-7803 or dma18@psu.edu.



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