

Positive attitudes about aging reduce risk of dementia in older adults

By Michael Greenwood | FEBRUARY 7, 2018



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Research has shown that older persons who have acquired positive beliefs about old age from their surrounding culture are less likely to develop dementia. This protective effect was found for all participants, as well as among those carrying a gene that puts them at higher risk of developing dementia, a new study led by the Yale School of Public Health has found.

Published today in the journal *PLOS ONE* (<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0191004>), the study reports that older persons with positive age beliefs who carry one of the strongest risk factors for developing dementia — the $\epsilon 4$ variant of the APOE gene — were nearly 50% less likely to develop the disease than their peers who held negative age beliefs.

The study is the first to examine whether culture-based age beliefs influence the risk of developing dementia among older people, including those who carry the high-risk gene variant.

“We found that positive age beliefs can reduce the risk of one of the most established genetic risk factors of dementia,” said lead author [Becca Levy](https://publichealth.yale.edu/people/becca_levy.profile) (https://publichealth.yale.edu/people/becca_levy.profile), professor of public health and of psychology. “This makes a case for implementing a public health campaign against ageism, which is a source of negative age beliefs.”

Levy and her co-authors, [Martin Slade](https://medicine.yale.edu/intmed/occmec/people/martin_slade.profile) (https://medicine.yale.edu/intmed/occmec/people/martin_slade.profile) and [Robert Pietrzak](http://psychiatry.yale.edu/people/robert_pietrzak-2.profile) (http://psychiatry.yale.edu/people/robert_pietrzak-2.profile) from Yale School of Medicine, and Luigi Ferrucci, scientific director of the National Institute on Aging, studied a group of 4,765 people, with an average age of 72 years, who were free of dementia at the start of the study. Twenty-six percent of the participants in the study were carriers of APOE $\epsilon 4$. The researchers controlled for factors including age and health of the participants.

The study demonstrated that APOE $\epsilon 4$ carriers with positive beliefs about aging had a 2.7% risk of developing dementia, compared to a 6.1% risk for those with negative beliefs about aging, over the four-year study duration.

Dementia primarily afflicts older people and is marked by memory loss and an inability to perform tasks.

Previous research by Levy and colleagues has shown that positive age beliefs can be strengthened.

The research was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Aging.

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