

Abstract

What is a healthy personality? Positive Mental Health and Long-Term Mortality Risk in the USA.

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Theory. This study examines the long-term association between positive mental health (PMH) and all-cause mortality in the United States over a 20-year follow-up period. Keyes' (2002) flourishing-languishing scale combines emotional, psychological and social well-being into an integrated PMH measure. The empirical relevance of this approach is tested by comparing it to an established indicator of negative mental health, depression, and the full range of competing mental health and psychological variables. This study presents one of the longest follow-up studies of mortality risks on PMH ever, and uniquely considers level effects of the indicators.

Methods. Cox proportional hazard survival analyses are used to model the effects sizes of PMH on mortality risk, when adjusting for chronic health conditions, health behaviour, psychological traits and common sociodemographic factor (N=5,207). Level differences are innovatively analysed by categorizing the complete array of psychological variables into tertiles.

Results. The results indicate that PMH has a protective effect against mortality (HR: 0.80-0.90), but that this effect is not robust to all of mentioned covariates. A major new finding of this study is that the lowest values (tertiles) and not the high scores on the PMH variables mainly account for the association between positive mental health and mortality. The study also suggests that there are moderately strong differences between the specific dimensions and indicators of mental health and psychological functioning.

Policy Implications. Further research is needed to specify the exact pathways between the different dimensions of PMH and mortality. Nonetheless, it seems that avoiding the lowest levels mental health is more important than achieving very high mental health

