

Pessimistic pensioners could be on their way to developing Alzheimer's

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Positive attitudes helped fend off Alzheimer's, the study found
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Do you feel that as you get older you are less useful? Do things keep getting worse? If you answered yes to both questions, you are at greater risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. A study has found that when older people had a more positive attitude to ageing, they were about 40 per cent less likely to go on and develop dementia compared with those with negative views. The researchers suggested that this was because they were also less stressed. More than 4,500 people with an average age of 72 were involved in the study and when the research began, none had been diagnosed with dementia.

They were all asked to fill in a survey that assessed their view of ageing, also asking questions such as, "Do you have as much pep as you had last year?" and, "Are you as happy now as you were when you were younger?"

The entire group was followed for four years, to see what relation if any there was between those answers and contracting dementia.

Past research has shown that when older people are exposed to negative stereotypes about ageing, it puts more stress on their cardiovascular system, which could itself raise the risk of dementia. The researchers thought that thinking positively about your future could be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“The positive age beliefs of older individuals appear to provide a means of coping with exposure to ageism which is prevalent in society,” the Yale School of Medicine team wrote in the journal PLOS One. “It was found that older participants in a positive-age-belief intervention interpreted their environment in a more age-friendly way. The reduction of stress by positive age beliefs could potentially contribute to a lower incidence of dementia among older individuals.”

At the end of four years, 200 of the group had contracted dementia and it struck disproportionately among those who had been more pessimistic about their situation at the start.

Other scientists said that there was reason to be sceptical when interpreting the findings. While none of the sample had been diagnosed with dementia at the start, dementia can develop for years before it is detected. So it is possible that the dementia caused the pessimism rather than the other way round.

Sara Imarisio, head of research at Alzheimer’s Research UK, said: “A few studies suggest a link between psychological factors and brain health, but it can be very difficult to untangle cause and effect in these relationships.”

She said that in terms of clinical applications, there were several more obvious interventions before we considered actively trying to make people more optimistic.

“We will need to see more research before we can tell whether working to change people’s beliefs about ageing could affect their dementia risk,” she said. “Staying mentally and physically active, not smoking, eating a healthy diet, only drinking in moderation and keeping blood pressure and cholesterol in check can all play a role in supporting brain health into old age.”