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Creativity and Longevity

Do creative people live longer?

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Do creative people live longer? One recent study by Turiano, Spiro, and Mroczek (2012) suggests such an association. This may be good news, but perhaps for veteran men only, since the study did not include women in its sample of 1,349 veterans (90 percent white) who were followed from 1990-91 to 2008. During this study period, 547 veterans died (41 percent ranging from 0.80 to 18.50 years, Mean = 11.01 years).

The study examined whether [openness to experience](#), [education](#), physical health (seriousness of illness), and [smoking](#) predicted risk of mortality. The data on these aforementioned variables were gathered in 1990-91. In the study, veterans rated themselves on a nine-point scale (1 = extremely inaccurate; 9 = extremely accurate) on 20 adjectives that are regarded as markers of openness to experience. A factor analysis of the openness scale suggested two facets: intellect and [creativity](#). The seven adjectives pertaining to intellect were identified as unintellectual, unintelligent, unreflective,

uninquisitive, unsophisticated, bright, and introspective. The five adjectives pertaining to creativity were identified as creative, imaginative, artistic, innovative, and uncreative. The two facets correlated 0.12, suggesting a small degree of overlap between them.

The study's analyses showed that age, smoking, and physical health at the time of completing the questionnaires (1990-91) were predictive of mortality. Specifically, each standard deviation (SD) increase in age predicted an 11 percent increase in mortality; the corresponding increases in mortality due to seriousness of illness and being a current smoker were 29 percent and 61 percent, respectively. None of this may be surprising. Education and intellect were not significant predictors, neither was openness to experience, *per se*. Interestingly, however, creativity (a facet of openness) was related to a reduced risk of mortality. Specifically, each SD increase in creativity was associated with a 12 percent decrease in mortality risk over the 18-year follow-up period. The study's authors concluded "creativity predicted mortality risk above and beyond age, education, smoking, and health status" (p.666).

Why is it that creativity but not intellect predicted a reduced risk of dying? Turiano et al. explained that intellect was positively correlated with age and thus did not add much to prediction of risk. Creativity, on the other hand, was unrelated to age. The next question is why were the more creative veterans at lower risk of dying? Turiano et al. speculated, creativity may reduce the risk of dying by way of enabling the veterans "to better confront the problems associated with increasing age and declining health and may have important effects on slowing cognitive aging" (p. 666). Turiano et al. suggested that "promoting creativity throughout the life course, and especially at older ages, may delay the cognitive and physical health declines associated with normative aging" (p. 669).

It's impressive that self-ratings on a few adjectives pertaining to creativity were found to predict a reduced risk of dying in a longitudinal study that spanned 18 years, but, readers should be cautious in drawing causal implications that engaging in creative efforts will increase their chances of living longer. These results only suggest that self-ratings on select adjectives predict mortality risk. We do not know to what extent these self-perceptions of creativity are related to actual creative efforts by veterans in their everyday life, particularly if their creative efforts enabled them to "better confront the problems associated with increasing age and declining health and may have important effects on slowing cognitive aging" (Turiano, et al., p. 667) or that "creative and curious individuals have the advantage of being inquisitive and

more willing to try new approaches to [stress management](#) and health care” (p. 666).

Perhaps much good can result in promoting creativity to seek better ways to confront one’s everyday health problems and hassles. And, if engaging in creative pursuits (e.g., writing, pursuing hobbies) contributes to longevity—that would be an added bonus. Clearly, no one thing predicts what puts us at increased risk for dying. The study did not address whether actually engaging in creative efforts or the use of one’s creative energies in finding ways to find solutions to health problems that contributes to longevity. It is conceivable that creative individuals may dedicate their energies only to their specific areas of interests and may not be good at general problem solving, especially concerning their health-related issues. As Turiano et al. noted, more work is needed to “replicate these findings and to determine why creativity confers a protective effect” (p. 669). Or does it?

Reference

Turiano, N. A., Spiro III, A., & Mroczek, D. K. (2012). Openness to experience and mortality in men: Analysis of traits and facets. *Journal of Aging and Health, 25*, 654-672.

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