

Beyond early adversity: A multidimensional approach linking early experiences to successful aging

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Adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, abuse and neglect have been linked to poor mental and physical health outcomes in adulthood. However, characterizing early experiences only in terms of extreme stressors fails to capture the full spectrum of childhood for most people.

In fact, a recent study by Lee et al. (2015) in *Psychology and Aging* suggests that looking at early adversity only tells part of the story. Using a novel person-centered approach, the authors reported three prototypic patterns based on recalled positive and negative childhood experiences across multiple domains, labeled as cherished (nurturing environment with some losses), harshly disciplined (potentially abusive parental discipline and non-normative stressors, such as sexual molestation) and ordinary (few stressors and low parental attention). Compared with the other groups, cherished children were better able to form and maintain supportive relationships in midlife, which in turn were related to greater life satisfaction, positive mood, feelings of competence and more positive relations in older ages. A key take-home message is that it is not a lack of early adversity per se, but dealing with stressors in the context of strong familial and external support, which allows children to learn healthy ways of coping with hardship and garnering support, thus promoting well-being across the lifespan.

A person-centered approach has the advantage of allowing researchers to consider multiple aspects of the childhood environment simultaneously,

which can help identify a set of co-occurring factors that influence subsequent development. In this study, the authors applied latent class analysis to questionnaire items covering multiple domains of early experiences, including close relationships, significant life events, parental discipline, extracurricular activities, parental positive regard, and self-perceptions from birth to age 19. They examined whether specific patterns of experiences were differentially related to successful aging, defined as greater psychological well-being in later life. They also evaluated whether social support in midlife served as the link between early experiences and psychological well-being in later life. The study was based on 1,076 men from the Veterans Affairs Normative Aging Study, a cohort of community-dwelling men in the Boston area who were born between 1903 and 1945 and have been followed since the 1960s.

The finding of successful aging among the cherished children - those who enjoyed the most nurturing early environment but also suffered serious losses - underscores the notion that focusing solely on adversity does not fully capture the heterogeneity of early experiences. This study provides the impetus to approach early experiences as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive, neutral, and negative events, as well as normative and less typical experiences spanning the personal, familial, school and community domains. Researchers, educators, practitioners and policy-makers are encouraged to consider the interplay among different facets of early experiences and how such combinations influence developmental outcomes.

More information: Lewina O. Lee et al. Do cherished children age successfully? Longitudinal findings from the Veterans Affairs Normative Aging Study., *Psychology and Aging* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000050](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000050)

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