

Teenage behaviour determines health in later life, research finds

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Teenagers whose non-cognitive skills are poorly developed are more likely to suffer from health problems later in life, according to groundbreaking new research by a group of expert from The University of Manchester.

Rose Atkins of the University's Division of Population Health, Health Services Research & Primary Care—along with colleagues Alex Turner, Tarani Chandola and Matt Sutton—set out to investigate non-cognitive skills as they are one of the least explored determinants of health and well-being, despite the fact that evidence surrounding their importance is growing quickly.

These skills are conscientiousness—an aggregate of how hardworking, cautious, and rigid an adolescent is—and neuroticism—how worried, unhappy, and fearful an adolescent is.

The researchers used data on a cohort of individuals followed throughout their life, and carried out [statistical analysis](#) to study the relationship between adolescent non-cognitive skills and later-life health.

The non-cognitive skills were reported by teachers, based on the behavior of students at age 16.

The study found that individuals higher in adolescent conscientiousness cope better with stress in adulthood, and are at a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. In comparison, those higher in adolescent neuroticism have poorer health-related quality of life in adulthood, higher levels of physiological "wear and tear," and are at a greater risk of cardiovascular disease. For most of these results, they find that effects are largest for individuals with poorer health in adulthood.

The researchers conclude that policies to improve adolescent conscientiousness and reduce adolescent neuroticism would offer the most long-term health benefits to those with the poorest health.

"There is a growing body of evidence that suggests school-based interventions to improve these skills can have lasting positive effects on important life outcomes, such as educational attainment and health," said Rose. "Extracurricular activities and [work experience](#) have also been shown to improve these skills. Having a greater focus on the improvement of non-[cognitive skills](#) at both primary and secondary school level would be a positive policy decision. However, these skills are also determined by socioeconomic factors such as family income, parental education, and parental investment. Therefore, more complex public policy is needed to reduce social inequality."

More information: Rose Atkins et al. Going beyond the mean in examining relationships of adolescent non-cognitive skills with health-related quality of life and biomarkers in later-life, *Economics & Human Biology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100923](#)

Provided by University of Manchester

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