

Social support and a purpose in life may help preserve cognitive abilities with age in Hispanics/Latinos

7 March 2019

Higher social support and having a sense of purpose in life are each associated with higher cognitive functioning in middle-aged and older Hispanics/Latinos, while loneliness has a detrimental effect on cognition, according to preliminary research presented at the American Heart Association's Epidemiology and Prevention | Lifestyle and Cardiometabolic Health Scientific Sessions 2019, a premier global exchange of the latest advances in population-based cardiovascular science for researchers and clinicians.

Previous studies have shown that psychological resources (such as optimism) and stressors (such as loneliness) are associated with cognitive functioning in non-Hispanic blacks and whites, but less is known about the role of these factors in Hispanics/Latinos.

"Given the exponential increase in the Hispanic/Latino aging population, we need to consider tailored approaches to improve health. In this study, we are trying to identify key psychosocial resources in this population which could be used to improve their health as they get older," said Mayra L. Estrella, Ph.D., M.P.H., lead author of the study and a research assistant professor at the Institute for Minority Health Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Participants included 1,572 women and 1,200 men between 45 and 74 years of age (average 56 years) who are part of the Sociocultural Ancillary Study of the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos, a multi-center research project aimed at identifying factors that play a protective or harmful role in the health of Hispanics. Each participant reported on a variety of psychosocial factors, and they were tested on various cognitive skills and overall cognitive functioning.

The researchers found:

- Higher scores on ethnic identity, life engagement and social support were associated with higher cognitive functioning;
- Higher scores on loneliness and familism (the extent to which the needs and interests of the family are more important than the individual's needs) were associated with lower cognitive functioning.
- Higher perceived ethnic discrimination, which has been associated with lower cognitive functioning in studies of African Americans, was not associated with cognitive function in this group.

"Life engagement—having a sense of purpose in life and engaging in activities that are personally valued—as well as [social support](#) from family and friends, were associated with better cognitive functioning, regardless of people's age, sex, income, education, symptoms of depression or heart disease risk factors. Tapping into these psychosocial resources while minimizing stressors may provide effective strategies for improving cognitive function with age," Estrella said.

The researchers were surprised to find that familism, an important component of Hispanic/Latino culture which is usually seen as a positive personal resource, was associated with lower cognitive functioning.

"Our results suggest that putting family interests ahead of your own may be a psychosocial stressor among middle-aged and older Hispanics and Latinos. One potential reason is that families with limited social and economic resources may place stressful demands on individuals, such as being a caretaker or helping economically," said Estrella.

While the current study did not focus on disease states such as Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, finding potentially modifiable ways to improve cognitive function with age may help reduce the high burden of dementia among older Hispanics/Latinos living in the United States, according to the researchers.

The investigators are conducting a follow-up study to see whether the same [psychological resources](#) and stressors are related to changes in [cognitive functioning](#) detected 6 years after participants' initial evaluation.

Provided by American Heart Association

APA citation: Social support and a purpose in life may help preserve cognitive abilities with age in Hispanics/Latinos (2019, March 7) retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-social-purpose-life-cognitive-abilities.html>

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