

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The other side of the coin: Dispositional optimism, frailty, and negative life events in aging

In the last years, the investigation of dispositional optimism in older adults has gained an increasing interest. Dispositional optimism is acknowledged as a psychological factor able to promote healthy behaviors, thus it can be considered an expression of resilience.

The study carried out by Koga and colleagues¹ underlined the beneficial contribution of dispositional optimism in longevity. The authors investigated whether dispositional optimism was longitudinally associated with longer lifespan and longevity, in a significantly large sample of older postmenopausal women. The results confirmed this hypothesis, showing that higher levels of optimism were associated with longer lifespan and greater probability of achieving exceptional longevity, even after taking into consideration several covariates and regardless of diverse racial and ethnic groups.

The study underlined the contribution of dispositional optimism in shaping advantageous trajectories of aging. This evidence allows us to advance further considerations, with regard to adverse trajectories of aging. We agree with Koga and colleagues, who considered the involvement of dispositional optimism in less long-lived subjects as a topic that should be further investigated in future research studies. In this perspective, frailty is acknowledged as a factor that can expose older subjects to adverse aging trajectories. Frailty also produces a condition of vulnerability to stress, resulting in an increased risk of negative age-related outcomes, such as hospitalization and mortality. Frailty also denotes a dynamic condition during lifespan, characterized by the mutual interaction between physical and/or psychological factors.² As we previously investigated, it is interesting to note that higher levels of dispositional optimism were independently associated with a lower frailty index,³ which is a measure of multidimensional frailty, based on the deficit accumulation model.⁴

Longevity and aging are two sides of the same coin. Longevity is the result of the favorable interaction between several biopsychosocial factors, leading to healthy aging; in this perspective, long-living subjects show greater positive expectations about the future, as well as being more resilient in facing age-related

challenges. On the other hand, frailty denotes a common adverse outcome in aging; in fact, frail older adults appear less optimistic, and generally exhibit lower resilience, as previously suggested.⁵ Clinical practice and research are increasingly focused on counteracting frailty and promoting factors of resilience.⁶ Dispositional optimism may denote the psychological common denominator between these two opposite pathways: optimistic subjects are more likely to reach longevity and, in addition, can exhibit lower levels of frailty. The longitudinal contribution of dispositional optimism to frailty trajectories needs to be further investigated.

A further note of interest emerged from the stimulating Editorial by Cobert and O'Donovan,⁷ who recently underlined that optimism (and pessimism, on the other hand) may play a crucial role in the individual response to stress and traumatic events in the course of time. Facing traumatic events is challenging and overcoming them appears to be a greater challenge for individuals (and for older adults, particularly). In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected the lives and health of older adults, being also a prolonged feature of stress. Dispositional optimism in older adults has not been sufficiently investigated during the pandemic. In a recently published study, in a cohort of older adults, we highlighted the fact that pre-pandemic levels of optimism significantly predicted a better mental component of health-related quality of life, during the first wave of the pandemic.⁸ As Cobert and O'Donovan stated, dispositional optimism can encourage the ability of the individual to cope, especially in the presence of difficulties and negative events to overcome, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To sum up, dispositional optimism is a relevant psychological factor that is able to favor, directly or indirectly, individual well-being. In fact, this frequently results in promoting the adoption of healthy habits, such as giving up smoking or alcohol; furthermore, individuals with positive expectations about their future may appear more compliant toward therapy and with medical advice. In addition, they may appear attentive and predisposed to prevention. Reinforcing dispositional optimism, as a factor of resilience, should also be a target of specialized

psychological clinical intervention for older adults, with the purpose to improve their adaptation to age-related medical conditions, as well as to adverse life events.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Maria C Quattropani, Alberto Sardella, and Giorgio Basile equally contributed to the conceptualization and the drafting of the manuscript.

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