

For Men Only

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“Strong values cut stress”

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Keeping your values -- what matters to you and why -- in the forefront of your mind seems to cut stress and may fortify you against physical illness.

That's the intriguing finding of a study by UCLA psychologists in the November issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. A further point worth pondering: It doesn't seem to matter whether those values are spiritual or secular. It just matters that you remind yourself that you hold them.

The study had 80 UCLA undergrads do stressful tasks. One involved making five-minute speeches about qualifications for an office job in front of people who were deliberately non-expressive. If they paused, they were "coldly" reminded of the time remaining and told to continue.

Then things got worse -- they had to repeatedly subtract 13 from 2,083 and, if they got it wrong at any point, start over from the beginning.

Before those tasks, one group of students had been asked to write about values they previously identified as important. Those who indicated that religious values were paramount were asked about God, the Bible and so on. Those for whom secular values mattered most were asked about the greatness of Abraham Lincoln, the value of community service and similar topics.

Another group also got questions on values -- but values they said were unimportant to them. The results: Those who reflected in advance on values they considered meaningful had considerably less cortisol, a hormone released during stressful events. Too much cortisol can undercut mental function and even predispose people to physical illness.

"Our study shows that reflection on personal values can buffer people from the effects of stress, but the implications are broader than that," said Shelley E. Taylor, a UCLA psychology professor and study author.

"Any positive self-affirmation can act as a buffer against stressful events; that can include values, personal relationships and qualities that are a source of pride."

"It's remarkable that such a brief, subtle value affirmation has the ability to mute cortisol responses and serve as a buffer against stress," said David Creswell, a UCLA psychology grad student and the study's lead author.

"This is the first finding showing that reflecting on one's personal values reduces cortisol responses to stress. The implication is that value affirmation may make a stressful experience less so and, over time, this could potentially benefit one's cognitive functioning and physical health."

Also on the good-news front:

-- Plain old aspirin and similar drugs can cut your risk of skin cancer, according to a study by Australia's Queensland Institute of Medical Research.

"We found that people who used aspirin or non-steroidal drugs regularly -- and that is two or more times a week, for at least five years -- had a 63 per cent reduced risk of squamous cell cancers of the skin," lead researcher Dr. Whiteman told The Courier-Mail.

But he said he did not believe NSAIDS -- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs -- would prevent deadly melanomas.

-- A new asthma drug appears to halve the number of people who get asthma attacks so severe they need to be hospitalized, The Times of London reported.

Xolair, developed by Novartis, was approved for use in the United States in June 2003 and has been licensed in Australia, Canada and Brazil. Drug regulators in Britain plan to grant a license to Xolair.

A professor of immuno-pharmacology at Southampton University said, "This is a breakthrough for the treatment of difficult-to-control asthma, where patients can be at risk of death."

The drug, given as an injection to severe asthma sufferers every two to four weeks, blocks the antibody immunoglobulin E (IgE), which is involved in the allergic process in asthma.