

RESEARCH FINDINGS SUMMARY

Self-Control and Health from Adolescence to Adulthood



QUICK SUMMARY

Skin-deep resilience is about the idea that hard work and striving can sometimes come at a physical health cost. In this study, our researchers examined whether patterns of skin-deep resilience are evident in adulthood by measuring risk factors for diabetes known as metabolic syndrome (MetS) and insulin resistance (IR). We found that African American youths who exhibited higher levels of self-control during early adolescence (ages 11-13) were more likely to graduate from college and have fewer depression symptoms in adulthood. However, for those who had lived more of their adolescent years in poverty, having high self-control was also linked to higher levels of MetS and IR in adulthood.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?



Previous research has shown that youths who grew up in disadvantaged circumstances and had higher levels of self-control in childhood also had several adverse health indicators in late adolescence. This included accelerated cellular aging, metabolic syndrome, and insulin resistance. Building on this previous research, our study investigated whether these patterns would continue into adulthood. This study also tested the question of whether the length of time a family spent in poverty would matter for these patterns.



WHAT DID WE DO?

Our study included 368 African American youths from nine rural counties in Georgia. When participants were 11 through 13 years old, we assessed their level of self-control, and we used reports from their caregivers to determine the number of years they lived under federal poverty standards from age 11 through 18. Families were followed for 15 years, and when participants were 27 years old, we measured their waist circumferences and collected an overnight fasting blood sample. These measurements were used to determine the presence of metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance in adulthood.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

African American youths with higher levels of self-control were more likely to graduate from college and exhibited fewer depression symptoms and antisocial behaviors at age 27. Among those who spent more years in poverty during adolescence, however, those with higher self-control also had higher levels of MetS and IR in adulthood (age 27).

WHAT SHOULD YOU REMEMBER?



While having high self-control is associated with many positive academic and mental health outcomes, it is also associated with increased diabetes risk factors for African Americans who spent more years in poverty during adolescence. This illustrates how the pattern of skin-deep resilience appears to persist into adulthood.

PUBLICATIONS

1. Brody, G. H., Yu, T., Chen, E., & Miller, G. E. (2020). Persistence of skin-deep resilience in African American adults. *Health Psychology, 39*(10), 921–926.
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ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This summary was prepared by Zidi Mu on behalf of the Foundations of Health Research Center at Northwestern University. You can access all of our research for free at our website, www.foundationsofhealth.org/publications.