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Supportive Role Models, Coping Lead to Better Health in Poor Teens

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Role Models and the Psychological Characteristics That Buffer Low Socioeconomic Status Youth From Cardiovascular Risk

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Low-income teenagers who have supportive role models and engage in adaptive strategies have lower levels of a marker for cardiovascular risk than low-income teens without such resources, according to a new study.

The study, by researchers at Northwestern University and the University of British Columbia, is published in the journal *Child Development*.

“Low socioeconomic status is one of the strongest determinants of chronic disease in developed countries,” notes Edith Chen, professor of psychology and faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, who led the study. “This study suggests that teaching low-income youths strategies to reframe stressful events more positively and view the future optimistically, known as shift-and-persist strategies, and encouraging them to connect with supportive role models may help reduce the physiological burden of growing up in poor neighborhoods.”

The study looked at 163 healthy Canadian teens ages 13 to 16 from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Researchers asked the youths about their role models, had them complete questionnaires about their coping strategies and their thoughts about the future, and drew blood to assess inflammatory markers that predict cardiovascular risk.

dolescents from low-income families who had supportive role models had lower levels of the inflammatory marker interleukin-6 than those who didn’t have such models in their lives. Low-income teens who engaged in shift-and-persist coping strategies also showed lower levels of interleukin-6. These patterns were not seen in youths from high-income families or in youths from low-income families who didn’t have these resources.

“This suggests that supportive role models promote shift-and-persist strategies and have physiological benefits specifically in low-income youth,” according to Chen.

Support for the study was provided by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 84, Issue 4, Role Models and the Psychological Characteristics That Buffer Low Socioeconomic Status Youth From Cardiovascular Risk by Chen, E (Northwestern University), and Lee, WK, Cavey, L, and Ho, A (University of British Columbia). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.