



Outgoing and relaxed people less likely to develop dementia

[PRESS RELEASE, 20 January 2009] People who are active, outgoing and relaxed may be less likely to develop dementia, according to a new study from Karolinska Institutet. The results, published in the medical journal of the **American Academy of Neurology**, are based on questionnaires about life style and personality, as well as medical examination follow ups during a six year period.

The study involves 506 people, 78 years or older, who did not have dementia when first examined. The group was given questionnaires about their personality traits and lifestyle. The personality questions identify individuals prone to distress (neuroticism) and need for stimulation (extraversion). Those prone to distress were more likely to be emotionally unstable, negative, easily nervous or upset and have a fight-or-flight response to minor problems. In contrast, the relaxed individuals were calm and self-satisfied, whereas the outgoing persons were sociable, active, and optimistic.

“... studies have shown that chronic distress can affect parts of the brain ... possibly leading to dementia, but our findings suggest that having a relaxed and outgoing personality in combination with an active lifestyle may decrease the risk of developing dementia even further.”

The lifestyle questionnaire determined whether each person had a rich social network and regularly participated in leisure or organizational activities. Participants were followed for six years. During that time, 144 developed dementia.

The study found that people who were socially isolated or inactive but relaxed had a 50 percent lower risk of developing dementia compared with people who were isolated and prone to distress. The dementia risk was also 50 percent lower for people who were outgoing and relaxed compared to those who were outgoing but prone to distress.

"In the past, studies have shown that chronic distress can affect parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus, possibly leading to dementia, but our findings suggest that having a relaxed and outgoing personality in combination with an active lifestyle may decrease the risk of developing dementia even further," says study leader Dr Hui-Xin Wang, at the Aging Research Centre (ARC) in Stockholm.

"The good news is, lifestyle factors can be modified as opposed to genetic factors which cannot be controlled. But these are early results, so how exactly mental attitude influences risk for dementia is not clear," says Dr Wang.

It is estimated that approx 160,000 Swedes suffers from some form of memory disorder or dementia. There are several different dementia diagnoses, with Alzheimer's disease as the most common. As the populations of the world grow older, one estimates that the problem with dementia will increase.

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Personality and lifestyle in relation to dementia incidence

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