Researchers at the Stein Institute for Research on Aging report that older women, plucky individuals, and those who have suffered a recent major loss are more likely to be compassionate toward strangers than other older adults. The study has been published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry.

Because compassionate behaviors are associated with better health and well-being as we age, the research findings offer insights into ways to improve the outcomes of individuals whose deficits in compassion put them at risk for becoming lonely and isolated later in life.

“We are interested in anything that can help older people age more successfully,” said Lisa Eyler, PhD, a professor of psychiatry and coauthor of the study. “We know that social connections are important to health and well-being, and we know that people who want to be kind to others garner greater social support. If we can foster compassion in people, we can improve their health and well-being, and maybe even longevity.”

The study, based on a survey of 1,006 randomly selected adults in San Diego County aged fifty and older, with a mean age of seventy-seven, identified three factors that were predictive of a person’s self-reported compassion: gender, recent suffering, and high mental resiliency.

Women—indeed of their age, income, education, race, marital status, or mental health status—scored higher on the compassion test, on average, than men. Higher levels of compassion were also observed among both men

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The odds against Dr. Beatrice Rose ever becoming a doctor were extremely high. First of all, she was born at a time when there were few female doctors and when women in the United States couldn’t even vote. Second, she came of age during the Depression when finding a job was a priority instead of going to college. And third, her mother was not encouraging, and Beatrice said, “I always obeyed my mother.” Fortunately, Beatrice’s determination and love of learning helped her beat the odds. She has contributed her talents as a physician, teacher, and public health specialist for more than fifty years.

She was born Beatrice Kantus in 1915 in Brooklyn, New York, to Russian immigrants. Her father died at age twenty-nine, leaving her mother a widow at twenty-seven with three young children. Beatrice’s mother, a gifted milliner and seamstress, was left to support Beatrice and her two brothers.

Beatrice was due to finish high school at fourteen, but her mother asked the principal to enroll her in a business course. Beatrice wanted to go to college, but finding a job came first. She and a friend took a government clerical test, did well, and went off to Washington, DC. “Our mothers didn’t want us to go, but as long as we were together, they let us go,” she said.

Beatrice landed a series of government clerical jobs, starting in the government printing office and moving on to the Department of Agriculture and the Lend-Lease Administration. Impressed with Beatrice’s skill and hard work, her bosses encouraged her to apply for better and better jobs.

During this time, Beatrice also enrolled at George Washington University. The campus then was only one city block, but she took as many classes as she could. “I was interested in all things medical, and I knew I wanted to be a physician,” she said. Her mother didn’t like the idea, nor did she like the idea of nursing because she believed that “nice girls don’t become nurses.”

One of Beatrice’s brothers was a premedical student at Columbia University, and he suggested that she enter the medical lab technician program. She did, even though her heart was not in it. She continued to do well in science classes, including physiology and anatomy, and fit in lab work on Saturdays. One of her professors encouraged her to “reach for the gold ring,” and by that he meant her dream of being a doctor, not a wedding ring. But one obstacle still remained.

“I was afraid to tell my mother,” said Beatrice. “I thought lightning would strike.”

To Beatrice’s surprise, her mother offered help and said, “If you want this, do it. You don’t always have to obey your mother.”

Beatrice was one of 1,200 applicants who applied for 82 places in George Washington University’s medical school for the class of 1943. Of the 200 female applicants, Beatrice was one of the four who were accepted.

After medical school, Beatrice secured an internship at the District of Columbia General Hospital despite having to compete with men returning from World War II. One of the returning veterans was her future husband, Leonard Rose, who was a resident in another Washington, DC, hospital. She chose internal medicine as her area of emphasis while her husband specialized in cardiology, becoming one of the first to work with catheterization and children.

After the war, Beatrice and her husband took jobs with the Veterans Administration, which moved them to upstate New York, Maryland, and Oregon. They had two children: a daughter and a son. They loved Oregon and settled in Roseberg (southern Oregon) and Portland for more than forty years. During this time they both practiced medicine, consulted, taught at the University of Oregon, and wrote a book on emergency training for paramedics.

Beatrice also became more and more interested in public health. She was the first female doctor to be appointed to the Oregon State Board of Health and became president of the Oregon Heart Association. In 1972 she returned to college at the University of Washington to earn a master’s degree in public health.

Beatrice joined the faculty of the University of Oregon to oversee medical students who worked in public housing. She educated children about health, including sex and drugs, an issue she still feels passionately about today. “I would like to see better education about family, bodies, community, and health in schools,” she said. “If I could leave a legacy, it would be to make child care a public health issue. The lack of child care causes so many problems.”

In her late seventies, Beatrice faced her own health crisis. She suffered a major heart attack and was unable to live in the cold. She and her husband sought out a warmer climate in La Jolla, where they had friends. They first settled in Mount Soledad and then moved to the Vi Retirement Community in University City in 2000. Beatrice was convinced she was not going to live much longer and wanted her husband to be well taken care of. As it turned out, he continued on page 4.
and women who had “walked a mile in another person’s shoes” and experienced a personal loss, such as a death in the family or illness, in the last year.

Those who reported higher confidence in their ability to bounce back from hard times also reported more empathy toward strangers and joy from helping those in need.

“What is exciting is that we are identifying aspects of successful aging that we can foster in both men and women,” said coauthor Dilip Jeste, MD, Distinguished Professor of psychiatry and neurosciences and associate dean for healthy aging and senior care. “Mental resiliency can be developed through meditation, mindfulness, and stress reduction practices. We can also teach people that the silver lining to adversity is an opportunity for personal growth.”

Coauthors include Raeanne C. Moore, A’verria Sirkin Martin, and Wesley Thompson (UC San Diego Department of Psychiatry and Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging); Allisson Kaup (Sierra Pacific Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center; San Francisco VA Medical Center; and UC San Francisco Department of Psychiatry); Matthew Peters (The Johns Hopkins University Department of Psychiatry); and Shahrokh Golshan (UC San Diego Department of Psychiatry).

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and sedentary behavior in older adults. She works mostly with members of retirement communities and senior centers.

Dr. Kerr received her doctorate from the University of Birmingham, England, in 2001; she studied interventions and environments that promote stair use. She edited the international book The ABC of Behavior Change and was recently named one of the world’s most influential scientists by the media and information firm Thomson Reuters.

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Jacqueline Kerr, PhD

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died five years later, after fifty-seven years of marriage.

Beatrice is modest about her longevity. “It’s just nature doing what it does,” she said. She adopted a healthy diet soon after marrying Leonard in the late 1940s to help reduce his hypertension. She is not a big fan of exercise but said she has always moved around a lot and quickly. “My mother called me Mercury,” she said.

Beatrice’s mental agility hasn’t slowed down. She is an active member of San Diego Independent Scholars, a group that meets regularly to discuss and share ideas; and several study groups on film, literature, and culture. Beatrice leads the neuroscience group, which is devoted to exploring questions about the mind such as What is a thought? and What is consciousness?