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FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS IN MIDLIFE ARE ASSOCIATED WITH DEMENTIA RISK IN LATER LIFE

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Background: Although an association between depressive feelings and dementia has been established previously, the nature of this relation remains unclear. Establishing causality has been complicated by the typical use of a short follow-up and aged participants already at baseline. The aim with this study was to investigate the association between feelings of hopelessness in midlife and cognitive impairment in later life.

Methods: From a representative population in Eastern Finland, originally investigated between 1972-1987, a random sample of 2000 survivors was invited for re-examination in 1998, averagely 21 years later. The mean age of the 1449 persons who accepted the invitation was 50.4 (range 39-64) at baseline and 71.3 years (range 65-80) at follow-up. Baseline scores of hopelessness were related to cognitive status at follow-up, mainly through logistic regression. Adjustments were made for age, years of education, gender, APOE4 and a number of health and lifestyle factors at baseline. In addition we analyzed differences in hopelessness scores between baseline and follow-up within the different outcome groups.

Results: Participants with high levels of hopelessness at midlife had more than a doubled risk of cognitive impairment in later life as expressed by an odds ratio of 2.24 (1.4-3.6), even higher specifically for Alzheimer's disease. Persons with high levels of hopelessness at midlife and who in addition carried the apolipoprotein allele 4 (ApoE ε4) had a highly elevated risk of Alzheimer's disease. There were no significant differences in levels of hopelessness between baseline and follow-up within any of the outcome groups.

Conclusions: The results confirm previous studies showing elevated scores of depressive feelings in persons diagnosed with dementia, compared to cognitively healthy persons. On the other hand, the results also suggest that the major portion of this difference could have existed already decades before the dementia diagnosis; Carrying feelings of hopelessness in midlife may have long-term implications for cognitive health in later life.