

2020

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Recommended Citation

Lomax, Olivia (2020) "The Benefits of Reading on Longevity," *Osmosis Magazine*: Vol. 2020 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/osmosis/vol2020/iss2/3>

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The Benefits of Reading on Longevity

Olivia Lomax

What if I told you there is a scientifically proven way of adding time to your life that is as simple as reading a few chapters of your favorite book? A study performed at Yale University School of Public Health compared the longevity of people who read books to those who only read periodicals.¹ Those conducting the study predicted that the book-readers would have increased levels of survival, as reading books has been shown to promote two distinct cognitive properties tied to longevity.

The study used data from the Health and Retirement Study that followed 3,635 participants over the age of 50 who answered identical questionnaires via phone calls from 1992 to 2012. They assessed the participants' cognitive engagement by testing them on factors including immediate recall, delayed recall, counting backwards, naming dates and naming Presidents. These items display recall and mental status, both of which reading is thought to strengthen. During the follow up process, 33% of non-book readers died compared to 27% of book readers.

With a linear-regression model, they calculated the association between book reading and cognitive score. To calculate the association between cognitive score and mortality, they used a logistic model. They used a logistic regression to calculate the total association effect of book reading on mortality, which determines whether or not book reading is a statistically significant factor in mortality.

Books engage people's minds more in comparison to newspapers and other forms of reading in a process known as "deep reading." Deep reading prompts the reader to make connections from the written material to the outside world and ask questions about the content. A high level of textual engagement improves vocabulary and critical thinking skills, both of which

are tied to improved survival. The second cognitive process that reading improves is humans' empathy and emotional intelligence. This finding speaks to Leo Tolstoy's view of how reading can change human thought and behavior by empathizing with the struggles and lives of fictional characters. A greater level of empathy and emotional intelligence are also linked to greater survival.

Not only does reading improve cognitive functions like vocabulary, critical thinking, empathy and emotional intelligence, but through these strengthened cognitive functions, book readers were shown to have a 23-month survival advantage compared to non-book readers. When comparing book readers to those who read exclusively newspapers or magazines, the book readers had a 20% reduction in mortality. These survival advantages were seen in participants regardless of sex, race, income, health status, and level of education. Reading, no matter the person, was found to be a tool to improve cognitive functioning and subsequently improve longevity!

But how much does one need to read in order to reap the benefits of a good book? The study proposes that by reading a book for only 30 minutes a day (around a chapter or so), one can add significant time to their life. Reading is an imaginative way to lead a healthier life and far more enjoyable than alternative health remedies. So in between readings for class or whenever you have free time, consider reading a book to bring creativity into your day while adding priceless time to life.

References

1. Bavishi, A., Slade, M. D., & Levy, B. R. (2016). A chapter a day: Association of book reading with longevity. *Social Science & Medicine*, 164, 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.07.014>

