

# The mental and physical health benefits of emotional intelligence

There has been a considerable amount of work showing the positive effects of emotional intelligence (EI) on mental and physical health outcomes. So much has been researched that several meta-analyses have been conducted aggregating such work. The most prominent meta-analysis was conducted by researchers at the University of New England. They examined the impact of emotional intelligence (using the EQ-i® and other measures of EI) on health. Analyzing data from 7,898 participants, they found that higher EI was associated with better health. Specifically, EI may be correlated with mental health, psychosomatic health, and physical health. The researchers compared different models of EI to see which was the most predictive, and they found that the EQ-i had a significantly stronger association to mental health than other measures of EI.



## Mental health and well-being correlate with high emotional intelligence

Some of the most prolific work on EI and mental health outcomes was conducted by Bar-On and his colleagues. In general, this research found support for the positive impact of EI on well-being. Subscales from the EQ-i that are related to well-being include Self-Regard, Interpersonal Relationships, Independence, Assertiveness, Self-Actualization, Happiness, Problem Solving, Stress Tolerance, Impulse Control, and Reality Testing. Examining the results holistically, overall, EI (as measured by the EQ-i 2.0 Total EQ score) has been positively related to emotional stability and negatively related to apprehension and tension<sup>i</sup>.

Among the various outcomes to which EI has been linked, none are as central as the concept of EI's influence on well-being. In fact, the EQ-i evolved from a research question Bar-On proposed in 1997, **"Why do some people have better psychological well-being than others?"** Since then, multiple meta-analyses have demonstrated a clear link between EI and well-being.

In 2010, a group of researchers studied the impact of well-being in relation to EI by performing a meta-analysis with a sample of 19,000 participants. The researchers found that mental health outcomes were more strongly related to EI than physical health outcomes<sup>iii</sup>.

Developing EI through a training program can also help improve well-being. In a study of people with type 2 diabetes, a 12-week EI program was found to improve quality of life, well-being, and levels of EI. Importantly, these results persisted even at the three- and six-month follow-ups<sup>iv</sup>.

## Increased EI has been linked to higher levels of adaptability

A person's ability to adapt has been positively related to their emotional intelligence. Cancer patients with higher scores on the EQ-i showed higher levels of psychological adjustment<sup>v</sup>. With regards to young cancer patients, researchers found that regardless of the stage of illness or gender, children who had higher EI scores demonstrated better psychological adjustment and had stronger functioning in their internalizing and externalizing behaviors<sup>vi</sup>. Other research also found EI to be a positive predictor of adaptive coping styles<sup>vii</sup>.

Closely related to adaptive ability, several research streams have shown strong relationships between EI and resilience. For example, the EQ-i has been used to measure one's ability to cope with the stressful environmental demands of adjusting to a new country<sup>viii</sup>. Similarly, EQ-i scores were related to one's ability to solve problems and maintain composure in order to deal with occupational stress<sup>ix,x</sup>. For example, in a study of school principals, researchers found a positive relationship between EI and resilience. Principals with higher EI were more capable of handling the cognitive, emotional, and physical demands of their job<sup>xi</sup>.



# Developing emotional intelligence can help protect one against negative mental health

In one study, doctors and nurses who received training in EI experienced an increase in their EI scores and a decrease in their situational anxiety. These results continued to be observed even one month after the training intervention had taken place<sup>xii</sup>. In another example, 20 athletes took part in a randomized controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of EI-based coaching. Compared to the control group, athletes who were provided with the coaching sessions reported lower rates of anxiety and higher rates of self-efficacy<sup>xiii</sup>. Such effects can also be seen when looking at regular day-to-day life. In one study, EI was found to be predictive of a person's ability to handle daily hassles. Individuals with high levels of EI tended to be hardworking, more achievement oriented, and less impatient and irritable. Nearly all EI scales were associated with lower perceived hassles, strain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism and higher levels of well-being and personal effectiveness. Consequently, all EQ-i subscales were associated with higher levels of well-being and personal effectiveness and lower levels of cynicism<sup>xiv</sup>.

Studies of clinical patients demonstrate the effectiveness of EI on mental health. A study of offenders showed that EI scores had strong negative correlations with measures of psychopathology, depression, and hopelessness, meaning that offenders with higher EI had lower scores on measures of psychopathology, depression, and hopelessness<sup>xv</sup>. Similar negative relationships were observed in a study of depression in older adults (65+); for every 1-point increase in a person's EQ-i score, there was a 6% decreased risk of experiencing depression.

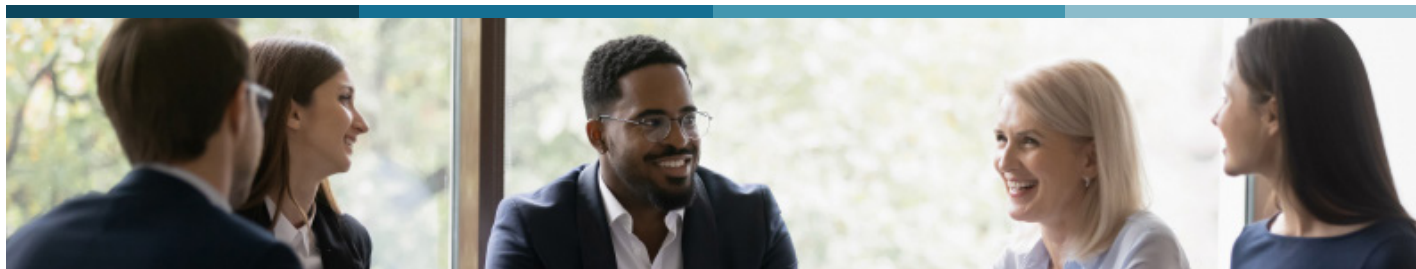


## High scores on the EQ-i relate positively to life, relationship, and career satisfaction

Emotional intelligence has also been linked to satisfaction with one's current circumstances. In a study of 157 Italian high school students, researchers from the University of Florence and Boston College found that EQ-i scores predicted current happiness, life satisfaction, and life meaningfulness<sup>xvi</sup>.

In a different study, researchers administered the EQ-i to 1,100 people and then asked them about their marital satisfaction. People who were satisfied with their relationships scored an average 5 points higher on the EQ-i than those who were not. Among the subscales, Happiness was the highest predictor of relationship satisfaction, followed by Self-Regard, Self-Awareness, Self-Actualization, and Reality Testing<sup>xvii</sup>.

EI also helps when making career decisions. In a study of women who were considering midlife career changes, researchers at Capella University examined how EI influenced what they would want out of a career. Specifically, they found that Emotional Self-Awareness, Self-Regard, and Self-Actualization influenced the extent to which the women chose new careers from a desire to do fulfilling, meaningful work<sup>xviii</sup>. In a related study, researchers at the Università degli Studi di Firenze found that EI predicted career fit even after accounting for personality<sup>xix</sup>.





## EI can contribute to numerous positive physical health outcomes

Bar-On's research has shown multiple relationships between EI and physical health outcomes. Higher EI scores are related to higher self-perceived health, less severe health concerns, and higher levels of optimism<sup>xx</sup>. Several scales have been highlighted for their effectiveness in promoting a person's physical health. These include Happiness, Interpersonal Relationships, Optimism, Self-Regard, and Self-Actualization<sup>xxi</sup>. For example, one study found that participants with strong relationships and social support (reflected through higher Interpersonal Relationships scores) were able to buffer the negative effects associated with chronically stressful conditions, bolstering their physical health. In a study of 599 college students, participants completed the EQ-i assessment and were asked whether they engaged in the recommended amount of physical activity each week. The study found that higher levels of EI were associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in the recommended amount of activity<sup>xxii</sup>. Finally, EI can be developed through training, and EI interventions have been shown to impact physical health outcomes<sup>xxiii</sup>.

A person's EI lies at the intersection of cognition and emotion, and it facilitates resilience, motivation, empathy, reasoning, stress management, communication, and one's ability to read and navigate a wide range of social situations and conflicts. As noted above, a substantial amount of research has shown EI to have positive effects on mental and physical health. An individual's EI matters and, if cultivated, can assist people in their efforts to lead happier and more fulfilled lives.



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