

Grip Strong and Prosper



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The subject of aging has been haunting me lately. I'm starting to hear a bit of a creak as I climb the stairs in our two-story office, and I've been trying not to count the days until one of "those" birthdays turns red on my calendar. Along with all of the uncertainties swirling in my brain related to the clients we're serving, I've also been wondering about what may be the most significant uncertainty of all: life expectancy.

While reading the May 16th, 2015 edition of *The Economist*, I learned that there might be a simpler than ever imagined predictor of the length of one's life: your handshake. The article titled, "Getting a grip," explains the findings in a recently published paper by Darryl Leong of McMaster University in Canada. Leong tested the grips of 140,000 people between the ages of 35-70 in 17 countries around the world. He used a device called a dynamometer, and followed those gripped by the study for four years. The focus of the follow-up was to determine how many volunteers died, and also the causes of death.

The research revealed a number of interesting findings:

- The average grip strength was 300 newtons
- Every 50-newton below the average grip was correlated to a 16% rise in the risk of death
- Among those facing serious medical issues, the strong grippers were more likely to survive than their weak-gripped counterparts
- There was no correlation between having a firm handshake and rates of diabetes or death from falls

As *The Economist* writers acknowledge, interpreting the study's data is a bit tricky. "Because the study was observational rather than experimental, it is impossible to know whether muscular weakness is causing illness or is a symptom of illness that is already there." Why might that matter? The former suggests that exercise and strength building might be a way to prolong life. The article concludes that, "Most likely it is a bit of both," and that the gusto in your grip is probably a marker of "generalized biochemical decrepitude-which correlates only imperfectly with one's calendar age."

This morning I resolved to stop counting the days and start attributing the creak I hear when I climb the stairs to the 100-year-old floorboards in our historic building. And as I look forward to my next half-century on Planet Earth, I'm going to try to remember to counter-with a firm handshake-any impressions of biochemical decrepitude my appearance might convey. Perhaps I should write that down. For now, I need to focus all of my attention on finding my car keys.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and welcomes your comments and questions about risk (but not aging!) at 703.777.3504 and Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.