A nationally representative study of emotional competencies and health

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Emotional Competence (EC, also called emotional intelligence, EI) refers to individual differences in the identification, understanding, expression, regulation and use of one’s emotions and those of others. EC has been found to be an important predictor of individuals’ adaptation to their environment: Higher EC is associated with greater happiness, better mental health, more satisfying social and marital relationships and greater occupational success. Whereas a considerable amount of research has documented the significance of EC, one domain has been crucially underinvestigated: the relationship between EC and physical health. We examined the relationship between EC and objective health indicators in two studies (N1 = 1310; N2 = 9616) conducted in collaboration with the largest Mutual Benefit Society in Belgium. These studies allowed us (1) to compare the predictive power of EC with other well-known predictors of health such as age, sex, Body Mass Index, education level, health behaviors (diet, physical activity, smoking and drinking habits), positive and negative affect and social support; (2) to clarify the relative weight of the various EC dimensions in predicting health; and (3) to determine to what extent EC moderates the effect of already known predictors on health. Results show that EC is a significant predictor of health that has incremental predictive power over and above other predictors. Findings also show that high EC significantly attenuates (and sometimes compensates for) the impact of other risk factors. Therefore, we argue that EC deserves greater interest and attention from health professionals and governments.