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Introduction: a genre of research suggests that living in urban areas impacts negatively on mental health (e.g., Carpiniello, Carta, & Rudas, 1989; Ganguli, Mulsant, Richards, Stoehr, & Mendelsohn, 1997), although other evidence stresses that the rates of depressive symptoms are higher among rural residents (e.g., Gao et al., 2009).

Objective: The current research mainly aimed to explore the part played by several socio-demographic factors, lifestyle and cognitive efficiency in predicting self-rated depressive signs in differently aged healthy adults.

Methods: One hundred and seventy healthy adults were recruited in Northern Italy and Sardinia — an Italian island located in the Mediterranean sea known for the longevity of its elderly people — from urban and rural areas. Participants were respectively assigned to old (60–74 years) and very old (75–93 years) groups, and were administered cognitive efficiency and self-referent depression measures.

Results: Sardinian participants showed better preserved mental health than respondents recruited in Northern Italy, and residents living in a Northern Italian urban town were less depressed than elderly people from the Northern rural areas. An opposite trend was found in the results for participants recruited from the Sardinian city of Sassari and several rural villages of Ogliastra. Finally, cognitive efficiency, gender, region of residence and marital status were the best predictors of self-rated depression scores.

Conclusions: Positive aging is more evident in Sardinia, especially in rural areas, where the maintenance of an adequate social status and physical activity help guarantee a positive level of mental health in later life.