

Older, Wiser, *and* Happier?

Anyone at any age can be truly happy.

BY DR. DAVID MYERS

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HAT AGE BRINGS THE MOST HAPPINESS? Fifteen? Forty-two? Sixty-nine? Most people say none of the above. They know that adolescents are plagued by insecurity, peer pressure, and struggles with parents for independence. They hear that the forties bring disillusionment with relationships and directionless careers. They fear that once they pass sixty-five, their income will shrink, their occupation will end, their body will deteriorate, and their family and friends will move away.

Yet some folks in each age bracket never seem to lose their zest for living. They convince us that true joy depends on more than years. What is their secret?



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Is Happiness Being Young?

SURPRISE. HUNDREDS OF NEW STUDIES explode these and other myths about what makes us happy. No age is predictably happier than any other. A survey during the 1980s of 170,000 representative people in sixteen nations offered a typical result: eight out of ten people in every age bracket reported they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with life. Every age group has miserable and joy-filled people. Just telling me your age gives me no clue as to which you are.

Nor do rates of career change, marital dissatisfaction, depression, suicide, or divorce reveal any hint of predictable midlife crisis. Divorce, for example, is most common among those in their twenties, suicide among those in their seventies and eighties. Investigating the supposed early-forties crisis period, National Institute of Aging researchers questioned 10,000 adults. They found not even the slightest evidence that distress peaks during midlife years.

Nevertheless, midlife affairs and disenchantment snare our attention. "While Diana puts on a brave face, a brooding [forty-two-year-old] Prince Charles grapples with a midlife crisis and retreats to his old girlfriends," said a 1991 *People* magazine cover. Some people—though fewer than popularly reported—do have extramarital affairs, but not usually during their early forties. Most of us do face crisis times, but not at any predictable age.

The supposed "empty nest syndrome"—a sense of despondency and lost meaning when children leave home—also turns out to be extremely rare. Seven national surveys confirm that for most couples the empty nest is a happy place. Marital happiness, which typically starts high and then declines during the child-rearing years, now rebounds. Indeed, many empty-nest parents experience a "post-launch honeymoon." Parents struggling with their teens should hang in there. As their nest empties, their marital relationship, as well as their relationships with children, will likely improve.

Changing Emotions

DESPITE THE STABILITY OF HAPPINESS across the life span, emotions change. As the years go by, our feelings mellow. Our highs are less high, our lows less low. Though our average feelings remain stable with age, we less often find ourselves feeling excited, ecsta-

tic, or elated. But we feel depressed less often, too. Compliments provoke less elation; rebukes bring less despair. Instead, both add to the pile of accumulated praise and criticism.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, University of Chicago psychologist, and his colleagues mapped people's emotions with electronic pagers. At random intervals they beeped their subjects to stop and note their current activities and feelings. One finding: young teenagers typically descend from elation or ascend from gloom in less than

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an hour. A snub from a friend means the world is about to end, but then the friend calls and all is forgotten.

Adult moods are less extreme but more enduring. Having survived past sufferings, mature people look beyond the moment. Age irons out the highs and lows; it offers less joy but more contentment. Things that once irritated—poor service at a restaurant, slow traffic, rain on a picnic—no longer cause a big deal. "At seventy, I would say the advantage is that you take life more calmly," said Eleanor Roosevelt. "You know that 'this, too, shall pass!'"

The Ups and Downs of Aging

"GROWING OLD IS THE NUTS," says my eighty-four-year-old father, only half-jokingly after laboring up a flight of stairs. The sadder side of aging involves not just the decline of strength, stamina, and the senses, but also, for many, increased loneliness.

Yet the rewards that can bring a better tomorrow

offset the punishments of aging. Compared with younger adults, older people report feeling slightly more satisfied with their work, their marriage, their

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standard of living, their housing, and their community. Moreover, stress declines with age. The upheavals and traumas of dating, child rearing, and vocation diminish. Most older adults describe their lives as "free" and "easy" rather than as "tied down" and "hard." Despite becoming more vulnerable to chronic illnesses, older adults are less



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susceptible to the discomforts of flu and colds.

Older adults also better align their aspirations with their attainments. As we age, we relinquish some of our earlier yearnings. We dream fewer impossible dreams and reduce the frustrating gap between our aspirations and actualities. Our expectations fall in line with what we perceive as normal for folks our age. One survey for the National Council on Aging revealed that most elderly people think others their age have some sort of serious health problem. Perceiving themselves better off than others, most older people can reason, "I have a lot to be grateful for."

For such reasons, older people report as much happiness and satisfaction with life as younger people do. Given that growing older is one sure consequence of living, we can take comfort in this fact.

Happy People

SO WHO ARE THE ESPECIALLY happy ones? Who are

the folks who report their lives are very happy and satisfying (and whose joy is easily detected by interviewers, friends, and family)? Here are the answers in a nutshell.

First, we can debunk some more myths. By telling me your sex, your race, and your income (assuming you can afford life's necessities) in addition to your age, you've given me little clue to your personal well-being. Happiness is equally available to men and women: women suffer twice men's rate of depression, but they also experience more joy. It is equally available to blacks and whites, to middle class or rich. Contrary to the presumptions of new college students (three-fourths of whom declare that "being very well off financially" is a very important life goal), objective life circumstances give little clue to people's inner well-being.

What would clue me? The evidence is overwhelming. I'd want to know your personal traits (whether you express self-esteem, feel in control of your life, are optimistic and outgoing). I'd want to know whether you have work and leisure that suit your skills. I'd want to know whether you enjoy a supportive network of close relationships. If you are older, I'd want to know whether you have sufficient health and vitality to enjoy your leisure and your friends. And regardless of your age, I'd want to know whether you have an active religious faith.

Faith and Joy

"JOY IS THE SERIOUS BUSINESS of heaven," said C.S. Lewis. One surmises as much from reading the new research on faith and well-being. Actively religious people (predominantly Christians in studies to date), are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, or to commit suicide. They're even physically healthier, perhaps due to their better smoking, eating, and drinking habits.

Religiously active North Americans and Europeans are also more satisfied with life. In one Gallup survey, highly spiritual people (who consistently agreed with statements such as "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely as those low in spiritual commitment to say they were "very happy." In dozens of studies of senior citizens, the faith-happiness link consistently appears.

Sociologists find that faith also buffers the stress of traumatic experiences. Those who have recently suffered divorce, unemployment, bereavement, or disability retain greater joy if they have a strong faith. Recently widowed women report more joy in their lives if they worship regularly. Mothers of disabled children are less vulnerable to depression if sustained by a deep religious faith. Parents who have lost a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome find more meaning amid the trauma if they are religiously committed. As Job's experience reminds us, faith doesn't promise immunity from suffering, but it helps our walk through valleys of darkness.

Does your faith enhance your sense of well-being? Of sustained hope amid sorrow? Of enduring joy? If so, why?

Based on research, I speculate that faith offers five ingredients of happiness:

Social support. For their active members, America's 294,000 local congregations are networks of supportive relationships. The ties that bind also connect us in close relationships.

Meaning and purpose. Joy is enhanced by a sense of meaning and significance. Faith provides a source of meaning by assuring us that we matter and exist for a purpose.

Acceptance. To experience grace—to sense that we are ultimately and unconditionally accepted—provides an unshakable ground for self-esteem.

Happiness is...

From his years of research, Dr. David Myers has discovered that the following attributes and activities tend to encourage happiness:

- fit and healthy bodies
- realistic goals and expectations
- positive self-esteem
- feelings of control
- optimism
- outgoingness
- supportive friendships that enable companionship and confiding
- a socially intimate, sexually warm, equitable marriage
- challenging work and active leisure, punctuated by rest and retreat
- a faith that entails communal support, purpose, acceptance, outward focus, and hope

Focus beyond self. Happy people are not preoccupied with themselves. Rather, they focus on other people and activities. New national surveys reveal doubled rates of charitable giving and volunteering among weekly church attenders (compared to nonattenders), suggesting that faith does enable many people to identify with something bigger than themselves.

An eternal perspective. New research indicates that the hope of life beyond death helps people manage what is otherwise death's "terror."

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Taken together, the things that faith offers—communal ties, deep sense of purpose, ultimate acceptance, an outward focus, and an eternal perspective—enhance our inner well-being. To leap off the fence of doubt onto the ground of faith is to bet one's life on a world view that makes sense of the universe, that gives meaning to life, that offers hope in the face of adversity and death, and that provides meaning and courage for living in the present. *

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