The aging paradox: The older we get, the happier we are

Believe it or not, there are upsides to getting older.

Yes, your physical health is likely to decline as you age. And unfortunately, your cognitive abilities like learning new skills and remembering things is likely to suffer too.

But despite such downsides, research suggests that your overall mental health, including your mood, your sense of well-being and your ability to handle stress, just keeps improving right up until the very end of life.

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In a recent survey of more than 1,500 San Diego residents aged 21 to 99, researchers report that people in their 20s were the most stressed out and depressed, while those in their 90s were the most content.
There were no dips in well-being in midlife, and no tapering off of well-being at the end of life.

Instead scientists found a clear, linear relationship between age and mental health: The older people were, the happier they felt.

“The consistency was really striking,” said Dilip Jeste, director of the UC San Diego Center for Healthy Aging and senior author of the study. “People who were in older life were happier, more satisfied, less depressed, had less anxiety and less perceived stress than younger respondents.”

The results were published Wednesday in the Journal of Clinical Psychology.

Experts on the psychology of aging say the new findings add to a growing body of research that suggests there are emotional benefits to getting older.

“In the literature it’s called the paradox of aging,” said Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, who was not involved in the work. “How can it be that given the many well-documented losses that occur with age, we also see this improvement in emotional well-being?”

As it happens, Carstensen does not think this is a paradox at all.

In her own work, she has found evidence that people’s goals and reasoning change as they come to appreciate their mortality and recognize that their time on Earth is finite.

“When people face endings they tend to shift from goals about exploration and expanding horizons to ones about savoring relationships and focusing on meaningful activities,” she said. “When you focus on emotionally meaningful goals, life gets better, you feel better, and the negative emotions become less frequent and more fleeting when they occur.”

The authors of the new work also suggest that improved mental health in old age could be due to the wisdom people acquire as they grow older.

Jeste defines wisdom as a multi-component personality trait that includes empathy, compassion, self-knowledge, openness to new ideas, decisiveness, emotional regulation and doing things for others rather than for yourself.

“As we get older, we make better social decisions because we are more experienced, and that’s where wisdom comes into play,” he said.

Another possible explanation for the emotional benefits of aging could stem from the physiology of the brain, the authors said.

Brain-imaging studies show that older people are less responsive to stressful images than younger people.
When scientists showed older and younger adults pictures of a smiling baby — an image designed to make everyone happy — both groups exhibited increased activation in the part of the brain associated with emotion. However, while a disturbing image of a car accident evoked a lot of activity in the emotional region of the brain of young people, older people had a much more subdued response.

Arthur Stone, a psychologist and head of the USC Dornsife Center for Self-Report Science who was not involved in the study, said that while the various explanations for the aging paradox are intriguing, there is still no definitive finding that can explain the phenomenon.

“There's lots of speculation about why older people are happier and having better moods even when their cognitive and physical health is in decline, but we still don’t have anything that fully explains what is going on,” he said. “It's a big puzzle, and an important puzzle.”

Another important finding of the study is that despite our culture's obsession with youth, it turns out that the 20s and 30s are generally a very stressful time for many young adults who are plagued by anxiety and depression.

“This ‘fountain of youth’ is associated with a far worse level of psychological well-being than during any other period of adulthood,” the authors said.

They noted that there are many pressures unique to this life phase including establishing a career, finding a life partner and navigating financial issues.

“It could be that age is associated with a reduction in risk factors for mental health,” said Darrell Worthy, a professor of cognitive psychology at Texas A&M University, who was not involved in the work. “Older adults may not have to deal with these stressors as much.”

The authors noted that the study does have some limitations.

Participants were contacted via landline, meaning the experiences of people who have only cellphones were not included in the results.

In addition, people were excluded from taking part in the survey if they had dementia, lived in a nursing home or had a terminal illness. That means the elderly participants were, on the whole, fairly healthy, which might influence their sense of well-being.

Finally, everyone involved in the survey lived in sunny San Diego. It is possible that aging in Michigan could be very different than aging in Southern California.

Still, Carstensen said the study had major implications, especially considering that within just a few years, more people on the planet will be over 60 than under 15.
“Policy leaders are saying, ‘How are we going to cope with all these old people?’ ” she said. “But a population who are in good mental health, emotionally stable, more grateful, and more likely to forgive are a pretty great resource for a society with so much strife and war.”

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