Medical Xpress

Hope I Die Before I Get Old?

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Back when he was 20 years old in 1965, rock star Pete Townshend wrote the line "I hope I die before I get old" into a song, "My Generation" that launched his band, the Who, onto the rock 'n' roll scene. But a unique new study suggests that Townshend may have fallen victim to a common, and mistaken, belief: That the happiest days of people's lives occur when they're young.

In fact, the study finds, both young people and older people think that young people are happier than older people - when in fact research has shown the opposite. And while both older and younger adults tend to equate old age with unhappiness for other people, individuals tend to think they'll be happier than most in their old age.

In other words, the young Pete Townshend may have thought others of his generation would be miserable in old age. And now that he's 61, he might look back and think he himself was happier back then. But the opposite is likely to be true: Older people "mis-remember" how happy they were as youths, just as youths "mis-predict" how happy (or unhappy) they will be as they age.

The study, performed by VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and University of Michigan researchers, involved more than 540 adults who were either between the ages of 21 and 40, or over age 60. All were asked to rate or predict their own individual happiness at their current age, at age 30 and at age 70, and also to judge how happy most people are at those ages. The results are published in the June issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, a major research journal in the field of

positive psychology.

"Overall, people got it wrong, believing that most people become less happy as they age, when in fact this study and others have shown that people tend to become happier over time," says lead author Heather Lacey, Ph.D., a VA postdoctoral fellow and member of the U-M Medical School's Center for Behavioral and Decision Sciences in Medicine. "Not only do younger people believe that older people are less happy, but older people believe they and others must have been happier 'back then'. Neither belief is accurate."

The findings have implications for understanding young people's decisions about habits - such as smoking or saving money - that might affect their health or finances later in life. They also may help explain the fear of aging that drives middle-aged people to "midlife crisis" behavior in a vain attempt to slow their own aging.

Stereotypes about aging abound in our society, Lacey says, and affect the way older people are treated as well as the public policies that affect them.

That's why research on the beliefs that fuel those one-size-fits-all depictions of older people is important, she explains. The study is one of the first ever to examine the ability of individuals to remember or predict happiness over the lifespan. Most studies of happiness have focused on people with chronic illness, disabilities or other major life challenges, or have taken "snapshots" of current happiness among older people.

The senior author of the new paper, Peter Ubel, M.D., has conducted several of these studies, and has found that ill people are often surprisingly happy, sometimes just as happy as healthy people. This suggests an adaptability or resilience in the face of their medical

problems. Ubel is the director of the Center for Behavioral and Decision Sciences in Medicine, an advisor to the RWJ Clinical Scholars Program, and author of You're Stronger Than You Think: Tapping the Secrets of Emotionally Resilient People (McGraw-Hill, 2006).

"People often believe that happiness is a matter of circumstance, that if something good happens, they will experience long-lasting happiness, or if something bad happens, they will experience long-term misery," he says. "But instead, people's happiness results more from their underlying emotional resources - resources that appear to grow with age. People get better at managing life's ups and downs, and the result is that as they age, they become happier - even though their objective circumstances, such as their health, decline."

Lacey adds, "It's not that people overestimate their happiness, but rather that they learn how to value life from adversities like being sick. What the sick learn from being sick, the rest of us come to over time." The new study, she explains, sprang from a desire to see whether the experience that comes with advancing age affects attitudes and predictions about aging.

The study was done using an online survey with six questions, asked in four different orders to reduce bias. The participants were part of large group of individuals who had previously volunteered to take online surveys, and chose to respond to the U-M/VA inquiry. The two age groups were about equally divided between men and women. About 35 percent of the younger group's members were from ethnic minority groups, compared with 24 percent of the older group's members.

Each participant was asked to rate his or her own current level of happiness on a scale of 1 to 10, and also to rate on that same scale how happy an average person of their age would be. Each participant was also asked to remember or predict (depending on their age) their level of

happiness at age 30 and at age 70, again on a scale of 1 to 10. They were also asked to guess the happiness of the average person at each of those ages.

To make sure that their online survey methodology didn't skew the results by including an atypical group of older people, the researchers compare the older group's happiness self-ratings with those from self-ratings collected in other ways from people of the same age range. They matched.

In all, a statistical analysis of the results show, people in the older group reported a current level of happiness for themselves that was significantly higher than the self-rating made by the younger group's members. And yet, participants of all ages thought that the average 30-year-old would be happier than the average 70-year-old, and that happiness would decline with age.

Interestingly, the younger people in the study predicted that they themselves would be about as happy at age 70 as they were in younger years, though they said that others their own age would probably get less happy over time. And the older people in the study tended to think that they'd be happier at older ages than other people would be.

This tendency to think of oneself as "above average" has been seen in other studies of everything from driving ability to intelligence, Lacey says. This bias may combine with negative attitudes about aging to help explain the study's findings, she notes.

Further analysis of the study data will examine the impact of individuals' core beliefs on their predictions and memory of happiness.

Since completing the study, the researchers have gone back to study people between the ages of 40 and 60, and hope to present those data

soon. They also plan to study how beliefs about happiness in young and old age influence people's retirement planning and health care decision making.

Source: University of Michigan