

Studies Reveal People Become More Autonomous, Happier with Age

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Realities associated with aging are numerous, and often negative. However, according to a University of Missouri-Columbia researcher, the aging process isn't all bad because it helps most individuals become more autonomous and self determined, achieving a higher level of personal satisfaction.

Kennon Sheldon, professor of psychological sciences in the MU College of Arts and Science, has co-authored three papers examining autonomy and aging. His research conducted during a five-year period reveals that compared to youth, older people are more able to pursue goals they enjoy and believe in, helping them to become happier with their lives. Such personal satisfaction, according to Sheldon, is attainable through aging and offsets the mental and physical changes that occur with time.

"It's not that we're downplaying the physical and cognitive declines," Sheldon said. "We're saying, 'Getting older is not all bad news.' It's not necessarily a downer. In at least one way, we get better as we get older, by learning to resist social pressures. Thus, we don't waste energy doing things we don't believe in. We may not have the same physical abilities or mental flexibility, but we learn to do things for the right reasons. We become more mature and make better decisions."

Sheldon's most recent study, published in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, compares well-being and goal motivations of MU students and their parents. The average age of adults participating in the study was 50. The average student age was 20. Both groups listed their life

goals and rated their reasons for selecting them. They also rated their current well-being. The results were calculated and older participants were happier, achieving greater life satisfaction, because they pursued more autonomous goals, Sheldon said.

"They are more satisfied with their lives and have fewer negative moods than young people," said Sheldon, a proponent of positive psychology, which focuses on human fulfillment and happiness. "Younger people feel pressured or controlled and that takes a toll on their happiness."

Sheldon's 2001 study, published in *Development Psychology*, examined age and the achievement of personal goals of Columbia, Mo. youth and adults between the ages of 19 and 85. A '05 study focused on the greater willingness of older adults to adhere to social duties, such as paying taxes, tipping for service and voting. It appeared in *European Journal of Personality*.

"Older people don't complain about these duties. They do it with less resistance," Sheldon said. "They realize the importance, even though it's not fun."

Source: University of Missouri

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