

Psychologists say longer lives can still lead to happier golden years

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As more people live well into their 80s and 90s, it's reassuring to know that most people get happier as they age and exert more emotional control than younger adults, according to researchers who spoke at the 117th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association.

"Life expectancy changed because people changed the way they lived," said Lauren Carstensen, PhD. "Now that we're here, we have to keep adapting. We are in the middle of a second revolution and it's up to us to make adulthood itself longer and healthier."

Carstensen, a psychology professor at Stanford University and founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, said the percentage of people on the planet who are over 65 is expected to more than double by the year 2050, and the fastest-growing segment of the population is people over [age](#) 85.

Susan Turk Charles, PhD, of the University of California, Irvine, presented a review of several psychological studies on aging and [mental health](#). She found that except for people with dementia-related diseases, mental health generally improves with age. One study she cited - a 23-year longitudinal study looking at three groups of people, each at different stages in their lives - found that emotional happiness improved with age.

Research has also shown that older adults exert greater emotional control than younger adults, meaning older adults are more likely to actively

avoid or limit negative, stressful situations than do younger adults, Charles said. She presented results from one study in which younger and older adults reported their thoughts and emotions after hearing personal criticism by two other people. Younger adults focused more on the negative comments and demanded more information about the origin of the criticism. Older adults were less likely to dwell on the negative comments and their responses were less negative overall compared to those of the younger adults.

"Based on work by Carstensen and her colleagues, we know that older people are increasingly aware that the time they have left in life is growing shorter," said Charles. "They want to make the best of it so they avoid engaging in situations that will make them unhappy. They have also had more time to learn and understand the intentions of others which help them to avoid these stressful situations."

However, Charles also said that these age-related benefits for older adults may not appear when older adults are faced with prolonged, distressful situations with no way to escape. "Older adults may have more difficulty with these situations because distressing events require both psychological and physical resources," she said. "We know that older adults who are dealing with chronic stressors, such as caregiving, report high rates of physical symptoms and emotional distress."

In separate addresses, Carstensen and Charles both acknowledged the importance of social relationships on longevity. Scientists have been uncovering evidence that the quality of people's relationships can influence the way their brains process information and how they respond physiologically to stress.

"These changes have a profound impact on health outcomes," Carstensen said. She cited a recent study of more than 1,000 Swedes in which those who had a strong social network were 60 percent less likely to have

symptoms of cognitive impairment than those who did not. None of the participants showed signs of dementia before the study. The researchers assessed participants' social situations, including whether they were married or single, lived alone, and enjoyed their social circle.

And while older people's minds may appear to be slowing down to those around them, Meredyth Daneman, PhD, of the University of Toronto at Mississauga, said that may not always be the case. In a series of studies comparing young adults to [older adults](#) during various cognitive and hearing tests, she found age-related declines in the ability to understand spoken language are often the result of a decline in hearing, rather than a decline in brain function.

Healthy aging, though, isn't just about looking at the very old. It's also about looking at the very young, Carstensen said. She pointed to a growing and compelling body of research that suggests even relatively small increases in education pay off in the quality and length of life. "Independent studies agree that even one additional year of education very likely increases life expectancy by more than a year," she said.

Carstensen had several suggestions for people who want to prepare for old age now:

- Envision ways to thoroughly enjoy the years that lie ahead and imagine what it would be like to live a healthy, happy 100 years.
- Design your social and physical environments - home, spending habits, eating habits - so that your daily routine reinforces your goals.
- Diversify your expertise and activities and avoid putting your social investments into only your spouse, children or job.

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