

Older = happier

March 8 2010, by Laura Rico



Physical activity and social interaction - such as that provided by the Newport Harbor Lawn Bowling Club in Corona del Mar - are key to preventing depression among seniors, according to UCI's Susan Turk Charles. Photo: Steve Zylius

(PhysOrg.com) -- UCI's Susan Turk Charles attributes study finding to seniors' ability to better regulate emotion.

Susan Turk Charles' research could put an end to the grumpy-old-man [stereotype](#). The associate professor of [psychology](#) & social behavior at UC Irvine has repeatedly found that people usually get happier with age.

Charles studies [emotional](#) well-being throughout the adult lifetime, with an emphasis on how seniors control their feelings. Her research is especially relevant, as the global population of those 60 and older will more than triple by 2050, according to the World Health Organization, going from 600 million to 2 billion.

Here, Charles discusses aging, mental health and the burgeoning ranks of the elderly:

Q: Why does happiness increase with age?

A: One reason why people over 60 tend to be happier is that they're more capable of regulating their emotions. Avoiding negative or stressful experiences plays a major role in their success. For example, when young people disagree with close friends or family members, they're more likely to argue their point of view. Older people are more prone to let it go and walk away, and they feel better about their actions as a result. Our research also shows that seniors spend less time thinking about negative aspects of a situation than do younger adults.

Q: Why are older people more adept at controlling their emotions?

A: We think it has to do with their perspective on life. They realize that time left is getting shorter. In contrast, younger people often must engage in unappealing activities to serve the future. They may think, "I need to interact with this unpleasant person because it might be good for my career," whereas older folks have the freedom to select emotionally meaningful activities and only associate with people they like. Plus, life experiences have taught them what they'll regret and how best to avoid problematic situations.

Q: What role does memory play in older adults' happiness?

A: It's key to emotional regulation. Research has shown that how people remember events from their past may be as important as the events themselves. We find that the recollections of older adults are more positive than those of younger adults. They recall unpleasant emotions as less intense and reappraise memories in a better light. Even when asked to relate a bad experience, seniors are more likely to mention positive

angles along with the negative.

Q: Why are depression and isolation often associated with aging?

A: If an older adult in your life has become despondent, you need to recognize that this is not a normal age-related change. A physical exam may find an underlying condition that's causing the dark mood. Psychotherapy could also help. Regular exercise and social relationships are crucial to preventing depression in older people.

Q: How did you become interested in studying aging and emotions?

A: When I was an undergraduate at Stanford University, the prevailing view was that emotional development ended at 18 to 20 years of age. It was frightening to think that at 65 you'd be just the same as at 18! I wanted to explore the changes that occur in the last seven decades of life.

Q: Why is it important to understand aging?

A: By the year 2030, one in five Americans will be older than 65. Currently, Europe and Japan have aging populations that aren't being fully replenished by births or immigrants. Imagine the implications for society and public health! In the U.S., you can see how advertising and marketing have moved in that direction, with frequent TV commercials about pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, life insurance and estate planning.

The face of aging has changed too: Celebrities in their 50s and 60s look amazing. Older people are more physically active than ever, and it's not rare to see them doing things such as yoga previously associated with only the young. At the same time, a rise in obesity jeopardizes longevity and quality of life for many. An older population also means a greater

number of people with dementia or who care for loved ones with dementia. We face both great opportunities and great challenges as our society grays, and we need to maximize health and well-being for this growing demographic. Successful aging in the U.S. will benefit not just [seniors](#) but everyone.

Provided by UC Irvine

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