

Researchers identify secrets to happiness, depression among oldest of old

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Peter Martin (right), director of Iowa State's gerontology program and a professor of human development and family studies, shares a laugh during a research session with local centenarian John Persinger. Photo by Bob Elbert

(PhysOrg.com) -- Neva Morris of Ames officially became America's oldest person and the second-oldest person in the world this month at the age of 114. And researchers from her community and Iowa State University's gerontology program have helped identify what predicts happiness and long life in centenarians, as well as what causes depression in 80-somethings and above.

In a study of 158 Georgia centenarians, the researchers found that past satisfaction with life -- even if it's simply recalling isolated career

accomplishments -- is the key to [happiness](#) in our oldest years.

"The past is the best predictor of the future, so you're not going to turn your life around at 85 or 90," said Peter Martin, director of Iowa State's gerontology program and a professor of human development and family studies (HDFS), who collaborated on both studies. "But it's also good to know that past accomplishments and the happiness that you had -- looking back at your past -- carries you through these very last years."

For the depression study, researchers added 78 octogenarians (people 80 or older) to the happiness centenarian sample. They found that diminished cognitive problem-solving ability was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in octogenarians, while living in a nursing home and greater neurotic tendencies increased depression among centenarians.

Both studies were published online in the Jan. 26 issue of the journal *Gerontology*. Jennifer Margrett, an assistant professor of HDFS, was the lead author on the depression study. Alex Bishop, an assistant professor of human development and family studies at Oklahoma State University (who was a doctoral student at Iowa State), was lead author of the happiness study.

Past life satisfaction pays happiness dividends

In that study, researchers analyzed the subjects' responses to a series of questions that assessed their happiness, perceived health, social provisions, economic security and life satisfaction. While there was no indication that resources affect happiness, past [life satisfaction](#) -- even individual achievements -- was found to have a direct association.

Because of their results, the researchers urge caregivers of the elderly to implement programs -- including reminiscence therapy and structured

life review sessions -- to foster feelings of happiness among very old populations.

"You can be not overly satisfied with your overall current capacity and physical well-being, but you can still be a very happy person because there's a lot you can contribute just by sharing some of the things that nobody knew because it was 80 or 90 years ago," said Martin, who is also in the second year of a three-year study of Iowa centenarians.

In the second other study, researchers measured depressive symptoms, demographics and functional indicators, cognition and personality in the subjects. They then compared the ability of cognition, personality, and demographic and functional indicators in explaining depressive symptoms in the octogenarians and centenarians respectively.

They were surprised to learn that overall cognition was not a stronger predictor of [depressive symptoms](#) at either age. Rather, it was the loss of the subject's control -- problem-solving in the octogenarians, and choosing where they lived in the centenarians -- that tended to depress them.

"In the case of the octogenarians, it's not so much your intellectual ability as it is the ability to come up with a solution to a particular task that you used to be able to solve in your 60s and 70s," Martin said. "And so for the first time, you realize that there may be decline in being able to manage tasks.

"And at 100, it's not so much the surrounding of the nursing home that gets you depressed," he added. "But in a nursing home, two things have changed. First, there's a sign that you cannot take care of yourself anymore. And then there's the sign that you know you only have limited time to live, which is different for an 80-year-old."

Elderly worried about direction country is headed

The research also confirmed that worry and anxiety contribute to depression in centenarians. And one of the things they're worried about, according to Martin, is the direction the country is headed and the world they're leaving for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Martin says these studies have practical applications for elderly care providers.

"When we have professionals who work with elderly in [nursing homes](#), we pay so much attention to the helping condition -- make sure they eat, make sure they have their hygiene taken care of, and so forth -- but you also have to work on the mood aspect of it," Martin said. "And I know people who work in nursing homes have difficult jobs, but just a brief conversation with a very old person can lighten up their entire day."

The research team also published two related papers in the Jan. 26 issue of [Gerontology](#). One confirms the importance of family history on present-day functioning among centenarians and octogenarians, while the other analyzed the influences on their economic dependency.

Provided by Iowa State University

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