

# People underestimate how much they might change in the future

January 3 2013, by Randy Dotinga, Healthday Reporter

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No matter the age, folks thought they were already the person they'd remain for rest of their lives, study finds.

(HealthDay)—Think you're done becoming you? Think again. A new study suggests that while adults like to believe that their opinions and perspectives are pretty much set in stone, no matter their age, their views may change more than they think in the future.

The study had weaknesses. It didn't actually track people over time to see how their opinions changed, and those who took part weren't chosen at random. The findings relied only on people who participated in an [online survey](#) after watching a French TV show, and just 20 percent of them were men.

Still, study co-author Daniel Gilbert, a professor in the department of

psychology at Harvard University, said the research offers important insight into how people view themselves and their ability to change. "It's hard to imagine ourselves in the [future](#). That mistakenly causes us to think we won't change in the future," he said. "What our study shows is that people dramatically underestimate how different their future selves will be."

The study's main findings were based on a survey of over 7,500 [adults](#) aged 18 to 68 who responded to questions on the website of a French TV show devoted to the secrets of happiness. Eighty percent of those who responded were women.

The [participants](#) answered questions designed to gather information about their [personality](#) in areas such as conscientiousness and [emotional stability](#). Then they answered the questions again, imagining that they'd answered them 10 years earlier or 10 years later. (The youngest participants weren't asked about their [feelings](#) 10 years ago, and the oldest weren't asked about how they think they'd feel 10 years from now.)

Then the researchers compared the answers with those of people who were actually 10 years older or 10 years younger. The findings indicated that people of specific ages think they'll change less in 10 years than those who are actually 10 years older think they changed over the past decade.

This suggests, but doesn't prove, that people underestimate how much they'll change over the next decade. It's possible that people looking back didn't have a good handle on the past or tried to put a positive spin on how they'd evolved.

Why does this matter? Because it shows people's inability to predict the future, Gilbert said. "All of our decisions are made with a future self in

mind, whether we're shopping for what we'll eat next week or a partner we want to marry," he said. "Most people believe they have the right values. It's comforting to believe that change has basically stopped. Isn't that what you want to do when you're on a trip? You feel good when you're getting to where you're heading."

Susan Krauss Whitbourne, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, questioned the study's value and validity. "The research has so many questions that I don't consider it particularly useful in terms of the findings," she said.

For one, she said, a huge percentage of the participants were women, and it's not clear how well they represent the general population. When asked about this, study author Gilbert said it's impossible for any study to accurately represent the population at large.

Whitbourne added that "the selection of a 10-year interval to use as the basis for prediction bias seems arbitrary. Why not five, eight or 15? Ten years is just a round number, but it has no intrinsic meaning in the way that people think about their lives."

The study is published in Jan. 4 issue of the journal *Science*.

**More information:** *Science* paper:  
[www.sciencemag.org/content/339/6115/96](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/339/6115/96)

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