

Outgoing young people become happier seniors

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But shy people not doomed to a miserable life, researcher stresses.

(HealthDay)—People who were outgoing and energetic as young adults seem to be happier with their lives by the time they hit retirement age, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that for nearly 4,600 British adults followed for decades, those who were "extraverts" in their youth gave higher ratings to their well-being and satisfaction with life once they'd reached their early 60s.

The same was true of people who were more emotionally stable—less "neurotic"—in their teens and 20s.

The findings, reported online recently in the *Journal of Research in*

Personality, don't prove that an outgoing nature is the reason for people's happiness. And they definitely do not mean that shy folks are doomed to a miserable life, stressed lead researcher Catharine Gale, an epidemiologist with the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom.

"How likely people are to feel happy and satisfied with their lives is in part affected by their [personality](#), but that is far from being the only influence," Gale said.

Trying to attribute something as broad as "happiness" or "[life satisfaction](#)" to a particular [personality trait](#) is tricky, according to John Zelenski, a psychologist at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, who studies the subject.

But, he said, personality can be seen as a composition of a few "core" traits that contain "smaller traits" within them. Extraverted types tend not only to be friendly, but cheerful, assertive, adaptable and open to trying new things, for instance.

So it makes sense, according to Zelenski, that extraverted people would give higher ratings on well-being scales asking things such as, "I've been feeling interested in other people," and "I feel optimistic about the future."

It also makes sense that extraverted teens would be similar decades later.

"Traits like extraversion and neuroticism tend to have considerable stability over the [life span](#)," Zelenski said. "It follows that the 'happy extraverts' early in life are likely to be many of the same people later in life."

Still, he agreed that a personality trait would be only one factor in long-

term life satisfaction.

The current findings are based on 4,583 people aged 60 to 64 who were part of a long-term U.K. health study. At the ages of 16 and 26, the participants had completed standard measures of "[extraversion](#)" and "neuroticism"—a tendency to be anxious, moody and lower in self-esteem.

In general, older adults who had been more extraverted in youth gave higher ratings to their current well-being and life satisfaction. That link held even when the researchers factored in people's physical or mental health conditions and their occupations at age 53—which was used as an indicator of their socioeconomic situation.

But that was just the general pattern, Gale said. And personality seemed to account for only a fraction of older adults' long-term happiness.

"There was still a lot of variation in well-being and life satisfaction that wasn't explained by personality in youth, or by the other factors we examined—adult social class, or physical and mental health problems in mid-life," Gale said.

She added that she does not think people should feel compelled to alter their personalities, even if they could. "I think it is probably better to aim to do things that make one feel happy and fulfilled," Gale said.

Zelenski agreed that personality traits seem to be pretty steady—and that, of course, shy bookworms can be as, or more, satisfied with life as the person who appears to be the life of the party.

But, he said, his and other researchers' work suggests that introverts might benefit from being a little more outgoing. In experiments where Zelenski's team put people in social situations and asked some to "act"

outgoing, assertive or bold, they've found that it temporarily boosts people's moods—even if they are naturally introverts.

They also looked at whether there is a "cost" of acting outgoing when your nature is to be quiet. "Do you feel stressed, or do you feel worn out?" Zelenski said. "We found no evidence of that."

However, he cautioned, the research looked only at the temporary effects of acting extraverted. No one knows if doing that repeatedly would ultimately make for a happier life.

Still, Zelenski—who described himself as somewhat introverted—said, "My advice to a shy person would be to try pushing yourself a little. Strike up a little conversation with that person with you in the elevator. It's possible that small moments of more-positive emotions could add up."

And maybe go to that party you fear will be a waste of time. "I think," Zelenski said, "we introverts often find out that things are more fun than we thought they'd be."

More information: The American Psychological Association has more on [painful shyness](#).

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