

Age with optimism and live longer

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Looking forward: two participants from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing

It pays to look on the bright side as you get old: Flinders University psychologist Professor Mary Luszcz says that optimism – expressed as confidence about living for another decade – is proving to be a good indicator for longevity.

Feeling upbeat also means you're less likely to fall over.

The findings are part of the analysis of the data collection for the

[Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing](#), run by the Flinders Centre for Ageing Studies.

After 23 years, the study is itself getting old, and only some 15 per cent of its original cohort of 2,087 people aged over 65 are still living. Nonetheless, says Professor Luszcz, the researchers are still acquiring valuable new information from the remaining 94 participants, who, at the time of the recent 13th [data collection](#), had an average age around 92 (ranging from 87 to 103).

Since its inception in 1992, the study has generated a vast array of data about the activities, lifestyles, attitudes, health, income, education and social resources of its sample.

Professor Luszcz said the recent focus of analysis has been resilience, using a narrative approach. Many of the participants have lived through the Great Depression and two world wars, and nearly all of them are now widowed.

"We've been looking at how these people view their current lives, as well as critical events in the past that they see as shaping their lives, and how they've had to adapt to increasing physical limitations and shrinking social networks," she said.

While negative stereotypes still tend to dominate general perceptions of ageing, Professor Luszcz said that there were many exceptional participants that counter this stereotype.

"We hear a lot about people who are frail, dementing or who have other limitations, and while these are important issues, there are a lot of people out there who are psychologically much younger than their chronological age, and even if their physical functions are declining, they've developed ways to cope."

"We have the example of one woman who at 94 could no longer bend down to play bowls, so she joined a gym where she could use the treadmill and the rowing machine.

"And we should remember that the people remaining in the study have vastly outlived their life expectancy at birth."

This latest qualitative study from ALSA was done in collaboration with psychologist Dr Kathryn Browne-Yung and Dr Ruth Walker from the School of Health Sciences at Flinders, and will shortly to be published in the flagship international journal *The Gerontologist*.

Contradicting popular belief once again, Professor Luszc said only some seven per cent of people end up in residential aged care. Typically this is only for a comparatively short period near the end of life, due to the need for medical attention or high level care.

Because of the context provided by the breadth of the information, Professor Luszc said ALSA publications based on the data had been able to isolate psychological factors affecting ageing well, and, by implication, resilience.

People who expect to live another 10 years, for instance, are usually vindicated, Professor Luszc said.

"We've also found that morale, self-esteem and sense of control protect against falling.

"Falls prevention is not all about physiology or fitness: one's sense of self is also contributing. People who are depressed or withdrawn are not paying attention to their environment."

While Professor Luszc, her colleagues and postgraduate students have

focused on psycho-social aspects of ageing, the ALSA data also contains important biomarkers of ageing well, including weight and height, blood pressure, balance, gait, hearing, sight, and grip strength.

The data, which are freely accessible, provide a major resource for research on ageing across several fields.

"The multi-disciplinarity means there are opportunities for people to jump in and use the data in ways we haven't, and we welcome collaborators," Professor Luszcz said.

Provided by Flinders University

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