

It's official – you're unhappiest at midlife

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Young people and the very old are our happiest citizens, with those in mid-life having lower life satisfaction, according to research presented Wednesday at Australia's largest social policy conference.

UNSW's Dr Ioana Ramia, from the Centre for Social Impact, is

investigating how [life satisfaction](#) changes as people age and what its drivers are, with a view to developing policy to target specific age groups.

Drawing on the national Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, Dr Ramia has found that happiness follows a u-curve, with the highest levels experienced by those aged 15-24 years and over 75.

"Satisfaction over life decreases from the early 20s, plateaus for about 40 years and then increases from about 65 up," Dr Ramia told the Australian Social Policy Conference, hosted by UNSW's Social Policy Research Centre.

Happiness followed a predictable trajectory, she said, with couples reporting greatest satisfaction just before having their first child and a dip from their first year of life through to about age 6, when the child started school.

"It then stays still low, but increases slightly, and is the highest around the age of 80," she said. "So that's something to look forward to."

Though multiple explanations were likely, Dr Ramia said her research showed a strong correlation during the middle-age plateau with employment opportunities and financial situation, when "money and ... jobs matter most."

This started in the mid-twenties and remained constant until older age, when the importance of work and earning decreased.

Housing was of little importance in the overall happiness of younger people, but they did care they lived close to the workplace, entertainment and friends.

There was a greater emphasis on the quality of the dwelling itself into middle age and beyond, along with neighbourhood and community.

"At this time happiness is at its lowest and it only starts to increase when people start focusing on other things, like their free time," said Dr Ramia.

Safety was an important aspect of life satisfaction in every age group, while health spiked twice – in the mid-30s with the first awareness of physical fallibility or illness, and again later in life, she said.

Though her research had shed some light onto the drivers of [happiness](#), Dr Ramia said the peaks at young and old age remained poorly understood, with question marks around how satisfaction could remain constant across the major parameters described yet manage to increase with [age](#) overall.

Defining what 'satisfaction' was and how it was rated by subjects was also a challenge for future research, she said.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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