

New study challenges 'mid-life crisis' theory

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Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

For half a century, the accepted research on happiness has shown our lives on a U-shaped curve, punctuated by a low point that we've come to know as the "mid-life crisis". A number of studies have claimed over the years that happiness declines for most from the early 20s to middle age (40 to 60). Today, the "mid-life crisis" is a generally accepted phenomenon, fodder for sitcoms and the subject of advertising propaganda the world over - but does it actually exist?

The answer is no, according to *Up, Not Down: The Age Curve in Happiness from Early Adulthood to Midlife In Two Longitudinal Studies*—a paper recently published in *Developmental Psychology*—based on data drawn from two longitudinal studies by University of Alberta researchers Nancy Galambos, Harvey Krahn, Matt Johnson and their team.

Contrary to previous cross-sectional studies of life-span [happiness](#), this new longitudinal data suggests happiness does not stall in midlife, but instead is part of an upward trajectory beginning in our teens and early twenties. And, according to Galambos and Krahn—award-winning Faculty of Arts researchers - this study is far more reliable than the research that came before it.

"I'm not trashing cross-sectional research, but if you want to see how people change as they get older, you have to measure the same individuals over time," sociologist Krahn said.

The team followed two cohorts - one of Canadian [high school](#) seniors from ages 18 - 43 and the other a group of university seniors from ages 23-37. Both showed happiness increased into the 30s, with a slight downturn by [age](#) 43 in the high school sample. After accounting for variations in participants' lives, such as changes in marital status and employment, both samples still demonstrated a general rise in happiness after high school and university.

Psychology professor Nancy Galambos - first author on the study - says it's crucial information, because happiness is important. It's associated with life span and overall well-being.

"We want people to be happier so that they have an easier life trajectory," she said. "And also they cost less to the health system, and society."

ADDITIONAL FACTOIDS:

- People are happier in their early 40s (midlife) than they were at age 18
- Happiness rises fastest between age 18 and well into the 30s
- Happiness is higher in years when people are married and in better physical health, and lower in years when people are unemployed
- The rise in happiness between the teens and early 40s is not consistent with a midlife crisis
- The rise in happiness to midlife refutes the purported "u-bend" in happiness, which assumes that happiness declines between the teens and the 40s

Provided by University of Alberta

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