

# How long do you want to live? Your expectations for old age matter

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

Why do some people want to live a very long time, while others would prefer to die relatively young? In a latest study, a team of researchers including Vegard Skirbekk, PhD, at the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, investigated how long young and middle-aged adults in the United States say they want to live in relation to a number of personal characteristics. The results showed that more than one out of

six people would prefer to die younger than age 80, before reaching average life expectancy. There was no indication that the relationship between preferring a life shorter or longer than average life expectancy depended on age, gender or education.

The study is one of the first to investigate how younger adults perceive and anticipate their own aging. Findings are published online in the journal *Ageing and Society*.

Using data from a telephone survey of over 1600 adults aged 18 to 64 years, the authors also found that one-third would prefer a life expectancy in the eighties, or about equal to average life expectancy, and approximately one-quarter would prefer to live into their nineties, somewhat longer than average life expectancy. The remaining participants said they hope to live to 100 or more years. Participants were on average 42 years old, half were women and 33 per cent were university graduates.

"We were particularly interested in whether how long people want to live would be related to their expectations about what their life in old age will be like," said Dr. Skirbekk, who is also a professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

The results, which were controlled for overall happiness, confirmed that having fewer positive old age expectations was associated with the preference to die before reaching average life expectancy. On the contrary, having fewer negative old expectations was associated with the preference to live either somewhat longer or much longer than average life expectancy.

"Having rather bleak expectations of what life will be like in old age seems to undermine the desire to live up to and beyond current levels of

average [life expectancy](#)," said first author Catherine Bowen, PhD and expert on mental representations of old age and the aging process.

"People who embrace the 'better to die young' attitude may underestimate their ability to cope with negative age-related life experiences as well as to find new sources of well-being in old age."

African-American participants were particularly likely to report wanting to live 100 or more years. People who identified themselves as Hispanic or as an ethnicity other than White/Caucasian, Black/African-American or Hispanic were more likely to indicate a preference for a life shorter than [average life expectancy](#).

In spite of the fact that women live about five years longer than men, gender was unrelated to how long people say they want to live. The authors also found that education was unrelated to the preferred length of life, although people with more formal education tend to live longer.

"For many, it seems that the fear of becoming old may outweigh the fear of dying," observed Dr. Skirbekk.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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