

People say they want to live longer—if in good health

December 11 2017



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Longevity is a such a pervasive goal in public health policy and even popular media, but individually most people only want to live long lives if they will be healthy, according to a new study that includes a

University of Kansas gerontologist.

"People in three cultures from around the world are reluctant to specify their desired longevity," said David Ekerdt, KU professor of sociology and gerontology. "To me this is interesting because longevity is such a valued [public health](#) objective, but at the individual level, longer lives are a goal 'only if' I remain healthy."

Ekerdt is first author of the new qualitative study published in the *Journal of Aging Studies* that involved interviews with 90 [people](#) ages 62 and older who lived in Germany, China and the United States.

The study is part of the larger international project "Aging as Future" supported by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany. Ekerdt has joined with researchers from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany and the University of Jena in Germany.

Promoting longer lives does have tremendous value, Ekerdt said, especially in reducing mortality at younger ages. However, research into how individuals consider longevity is also important because it provides insight into how people think about the aging process, he said.

The results of these interviews reinforce previous findings from this research group that revealed many older adults—in various cultures—think of [life](#) as not a smooth continuum of time but segmented into different states. The researchers refer to four "ages" or stages of life, including the third age, which is an active retirement where people leave traditional work and family roles, followed by the fourth age.

"People seem to view one part of the future as wanted and another as not wanted, typically the 'fourth age' which is basically the period when one

might experience a disability or a potential health decline," Ekerdt said.

For this study, the researchers interviewed 30 people in each country, and they recruited the sample with sex and age quotas to reflect a range of experience with retirement.

About one-third of respondents did not express aspirations for a longer life.

"Some felt their lives had already reached a stage of completion, and others as a form of fate acceptance," Ekerdt said.

A larger number of respondents did mention they wanted to extend their lives. Yet less than half of that group noted a specific amount of time they desired to live.

The strongest opinion among that group was the desire to live longer only if they maintained their current or what they deemed to be acceptable levels of health.

Ekerdt said the responses indicated people likely wanted remain in the "third age" of active retirement and primarily independent living instead of the "fourth age."

"That stage typically involves more vulnerability and decline," he said.

One implication for public health advocates and gerontologists could be to focus not simply on [longevity](#) but stress [health](#) or quality of life as well when considering policies related to aging, the researchers recommended.

"Slogans like 'add life to years, not just years to life,' appear to match intentions from elders in three nations," Ekerdt said, "because they are

saying something that appears to come from deep in human culture."

More information: David J. Ekerdt et al, Is longevity a value for older adults?, *Journal of Aging Studies* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaging.2017.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2017.10.002)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: People say they want to live longer—if in good health (2017, December 11) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-12-people-longerif-good-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.