

Feel younger than you are? Here's why you're on to something good

November 13 2018, by Catherine Loveday



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Emile Ratelband made [international headlines](#) when he launched a controversial legal battle to change his official date of birth from March

1949 to March 1969, reflecting the fact that he feels 20 years younger. The story probably made some of us laugh, but who can blame him for wanting to share his year of birth with the likes of [Jennifer Aniston](#), [Jay-Z](#), [Steffi Graf](#) or even my good self?

The legal bid may be a first, but it is actually common to feel younger than we are. A 2018 study with 33,751 respondents showed that once people pass the pivotal age of 25, they typically [rate their subjective age as younger](#) than their chronological age. And this discrepancy grows as we get older – for every decade that passes, people tend to feel that they have only gained five or six years. This is the equivalent to living Martian years as opposed to Earth years.

It turns out that this phenomenon may have rather important implications. A recent surge in research in this area has revealed that the extent to which people feel younger than they are is strongly associated with a whole range of health outcomes. People with a younger subjective age are less likely to suffer from [diabetes](#), [hypertension](#), [depression](#), [cognitive impairment and dementia](#). These people also tend to report [better sleep](#), [stronger memory function](#) and more [fulfilling sex lives](#).

People with a younger subjective age also view their future selves in a more positive light and are more likely to [walk faster](#). One group of researchers even found that people with a lower subjective age have a [younger looking brain](#). Brain scans showed that they had more grey matter overall, with particular resilience in areas called the prefrontal cortex (involved in planning and complex cognitive behaviour) and [superior temporal gyrus](#) (responsible for processing sounds and emotions).

These findings are not trivial – new research shows that people who think of themselves as 13 years older [are 25% more likely to die](#), even when education, race and marital status are taken into account. This

study, by a team at the University of Grenoble, pooled together data from three large longitudinal studies, where 17,000 participants were assessed over a number of time points.

Overall, people reported feeling on average 16-17 years younger than they really were – not far off the difference described by Ratelband. But importantly, this research showed that the risk of mortality was almost twice as high in those people who felt older than their age compared to those who felt younger. This effect appeared for both shorter time intervals (three years) and for longer ones (20 years).

Cause and effect

So it seems that to some extent, we really are as young as we feel. But how do we know which is the chicken and the egg? Are people who feel younger simply healthier to start with or are they so keen on being young that they actually take better care of themselves and therefore live longer?

Most scientists agree that it is a two-way street. We know that poor health makes people feel older, as indeed can [stress and low mood](#). The real question is can we do anything to break this vicious cycle? If we could somehow feel younger – perhaps by ignoring societal and personal expectations about age – might this mean we can live longer, happier and healthier lives? Early indications suggest yes.

In one study researchers enrolled a group of older participants in an exercise regime and found that their performance [improved significantly](#) if they were praised – but specifically if they were favourably compared to other people of the same age. Reducing age stereotyping might also be helpful – another study showed that exposing people to photos and words that are typically associated with old age, such as "grumpy", "wrinkled", and "helpless" [made them feel older](#). Interestingly, this was true even

when positive associations like "wise" and "full of life" were used alongside a smiling older face.

Back in 1979, psychologist [Ellen Langer](#) – now the longest serving professor at the University of Harvard – showed that simply turning the clock back 20 years had an age-reversing effect on a group of 75-year-old men. After five days of being immersed in a mocked up 1959 environment and treated as 55-year-olds, [these men showed](#) increased physical strength, improved memory and better eyesight.

Rateband's case centres on his claims that at 69, society does not allow him to do the same things that he could do if he was 49. He does not have the same employment opportunities, cannot buy a new house and does not get replies when he advertises on the dating site Tinder. Only time will tell whether he can win his legal battle, but if nothing else, this case may highlight an opportunity for society to change its attitude to [chronological age](#).

If we can learn to ignore the numbers on a birth certificate and cut down on the relentless societal references to getting old, then maybe we will lead healthier, happier and longer lives.

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