

# Study shows humans are optimists for most of life

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Is middle age really the "golden age" when people are the most optimistic in life? Researchers from Michigan State University led the largest study of its kind to determine how optimistic people are in life

and when, as well as how major life events affect how optimistic they are about the future.

"We found that optimism continued to increase throughout young adulthood, seemed to steadily plateau and then decline into older adulthood," said William Chopik, MSU assistant professor of psychology at MSU and lead author. "Even people with fairly bad circumstances, who have had tough things happen in their lives, look to their futures and life ahead and felt optimistic."

The study, published in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, surveyed 75,000 American, German and Dutch people between the ages of 16 and 101 to measure optimism and their outlook about the future. Chopik said the researchers looked at life events such as: marriage, divorce, a new job, retirement, changes in health and loss of a partner, a parent or a child.

"Counterintuitively—and most surprising—we found that really hard things like deaths and divorce really didn't change a person's outlook to the future," Chopik said. "This shows that a lot of people likely subscribe to the 'life is short' mantra and realize they should focus on things that make them happy and maintain emotional balance."

Chopik explained that regardless of life's good and bad circumstances, from the time people are 15 to almost 60 or 70, they become more and more optimistic.

"There's a massive stretch of life during which you keep consistently looking forward to things and the future," Chopik said. "Part of that has to do with experiencing success both in work and life. You find a job, you meet your significant other, you achieve your goals and so on. You become more autonomous and you are somewhat in control of your future; so, you tend to expect things to turn out well."

As people age into the elderly phase of life, the study showed a shift to declines in optimism, likely driven by health-related concerns and knowing that the bulk of life is behind you. While the elderly aren't full-fledge pessimists, Chopik said, there is still a noticeable change.

"Retirement age is when people can stop working, have time to travel and to pursue their hobbies," Chopik said. "But very surprisingly, people didn't really think that it would change the outlook of their lives for the better."

Chopik said one of the most profound conclusions in the study was showing how resilient people are in life.

"We oftentimes think that the really sad or tragic things that happen in life completely alter us as people, but that's not really the case," Chopik said. "You don't fundamentally change as a result of terrible things; people diagnosed with an illness or those who go through another crisis still felt positive about the future and what life had ahead for them on the other side."

**More information:** [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...  
ii/S0092656620300738](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0092656620300738)

Provided by Michigan State University

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