

At which age are we happiest?

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An evaluation of over 400 samples shows how subjective well-being develops over the course of a lifespan.

At what age are people at their happiest? This seemingly simple question has been studied extensively over the past decades, but a definitive

answer has long been elusive.

A research team from the German Sport University Cologne, Ruhr University Bochum, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and the universities of Bern and Basel in Switzerland has now shed light on the question in a comprehensive meta-analytic review published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*. The findings show that the respondents' [life satisfaction](#) decreased between the [ages](#) of 9 and 16, then increased slightly until the age of 70, and then decreased once again until the age of 96.

More than 460,000 participants

In their study, the researchers examined trends in subjective well-being over the [lifespan](#) based on 443 samples from [longitudinal studies](#) with a total of 460,902 participants. "We focused on changes in three central components of subjective well-being," explains Professor Susanne BÜcker, who initially worked on the study in Bochum and has since moved to Cologne: "Life satisfaction, positive emotional states and [negative emotional states](#)."

The findings show that the life satisfaction decreased between the ages of 9 and 16, then increased slightly until the age of 70, and then decreased once again until the age of 96. Positive emotional states showed a general decline from age 9 to age 94, while negative emotional states fluctuated slightly between ages 9 and 22, then declined until age 60 and then increased once again. The authors identified greater median changes in positive and negative emotional states than in life satisfaction.

Positive trend over a wide period of life

"Overall, the study indicated a positive [trend](#) over a wide period of life,

if we look at life satisfaction and negative emotional states," says Susanne Buecker. The researchers attribute the slight decline in life [satisfaction](#) between the ages of 9 and 16 to, for example, changes to the body and to the [social life](#) that take place during puberty.

Satisfaction rises again from young adulthood onwards. Positive feelings tend to decrease from childhood to late adulthood. In very late adulthood, all components of subjective well-being tended to worsen rather than improve. "This could be related to the fact that in very old people, physical performance decreases, health often deteriorates, and social contacts diminish; not least because their peers pass away," speculates the researcher.

The study highlights the need to consider and promote subjective well-being with its various components across the lifespan, as the authors of the study conclude. Their findings could provide significant guidance for the development of intervention programs, especially those aimed at maintaining or improving subjective well-being late in life.

More information: Susanne Buecker et al, The development of subjective well-being across the life span: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies., *Psychological Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000401](#)

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