

Can Gen Z reverse 'rapid aging'? Why they fear 'aging like milk'

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The oldest members of Gen Z are still a few years away from turning 30, but their anxiety over what they call "rapid aging" has exploded on social media like a premature time bomb.

Whether Gen Zers—ages 12 to 27—actually are on an accelerated path to wrinkles, gray hair and reading glasses, experts at Northeastern say there are a host of practices people of any age can follow to stay young in body, mind and spirit.

Does stress cause you to 'age like milk?'

Gen Z's simmering anxiety over aging came to full boil with internet personality Jordan Howlett's gently humorous posts about being mistaken for his mother's older brother—despite the fact he is only 26.

In posts such as "I'm Aging Like Milk," the bearded Howlett talks about stress and how Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson, who is in his 50s, mistook him for a peer.

There's no denying that Gen Z has faced unique challenges in terms of the social isolation of coming of age during a pandemic and the stressors of economic uncertainty.

Stress releases toxins that have implications for aging, says Dr. Carmen Sceppa, dean of Bouve College of Health Sciences at Northeastern, who adds that good health habits can build the type of physiological resilience that maximizes youthfulness and strength.

Practicing mental resilience could make Gen Z a particularly hardy generation, says Kristen Lee, a behavioral science teaching professor at Northeastern.

Strength and flexibility are themselves synonymous with youth.

Maximum resilience, however, is not going to come from vying for the perfect image on social media, says Rachel Rodgers, a Northeastern associate professor of applied psychology.

Social media wants you to feel old

Unsurprisingly, Rodgers, an expert on [body image](#), advises Gen Z to take filtered images they see on social media with a reality pill and disengage from interactions that lead to a flood of anti-aging product pitches.

Gen Z's grandmothers might have seen an impossibly beautiful celebrity profiled in a magazine article or ad, but once they turned the page the image was gone.

Not anymore.

The consumerist algorithms of social media are designed to get people to purchase products, and once you click on one anti-aging YouTube or Instagram account, you will be deluged with many more, Rodgers says.

"One of the things that is different from previous forms of media is the way it's responsive to engagement," she says.

"There is an underlying goal of increasing user engagement because that's how you make a profit. This is a place where they can increase their client social base."

Even knowing this, Rodgers was a bit surprised when she saw how many young people volunteered to participate in a study her team is doing about experiences with anti-aging products and services.

"I had assumed we were going to collect responses from a group of, largely, middle-aged people," Rodgers says.

"Many people who responded to the survey were in their early 20s. This was already something they were thinking about," she says.

Filtered friends and peer pressure

It's not only picture-perfect celebrities and influencers who are popping up on Gen Zers' feeds, of course.

Filtered images of friends, dormmates and acquaintances fill Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat accounts, leaving users to feel they are the only person on the planet to have a pimple or incipient forehead furrow.

"The [peer pressure](#) is pretty significant," Sceppa says.

It's not restricted to [social media](#) and could be connected to social challenges in which a job that pays enough to buy a house or live on one's own appears increasingly out of reach.

"They want to achieve a successful career and they tend to compare themselves to others. There is a psychosocial component of the pressures Gen Zers experience. Peer pressure is a stressor that can activate pro-aging hormones and toxins," Sceppa says.

Dehydration, processed food and lack of sleep

Toxins are aided by dehydration, improper nutrition and lack of sleep, and Gen Z might be setting records in these areas, Sceppa says.

Among her students she has seen an increased reliance on caffeine and coffee drinking, a tendency to get by on a few hours of sleep due to studying, video gaming or partying and a reliance on processed foods conveniently delivered to their doors.

Alcohol also plays a role in dehydration, and lack of exercise or too

much exercise interferes with maintenance of muscle mass—a key tissue contributing to metabolic health that starts to decline when people hit 30, a decline observed in clinical research, including her own research in healthy aging, Sceppa says.

"There is a downward spiral that happens when our muscle mass is not robust and healthy," she says.

"The muscle can be increased by exercise and by adequate nutrition in the form of protein," animal or vegetable-based, Sceppa says.

"But you have to plan for that," she says. With Gen Z being busy multi-tasking and trying to stay ahead in their lives, coupled with poor eating, inactivity, dehydration and lack of sleep, that could ultimately add up to unhealthy alternatives to aging successfully.

The solution, Sceppa says, is to focus on healthy eating in the forms of good quality animal or plant-based protein, essential fats, complex carbohydrates, fiber and water.

Loneliness is aging

Many of these dorm-delivered meals are eaten alone, in front of a screen rather than in a hall with friends with acquaintances.

And that in itself could be a risk for premature aging, if it adds to a person's sense of loneliness.

Feeling unhappy, depressed or lonely can speed up the aging process faster than smoking, [a study published in 2022](#) suggests.

And increasing numbers of young working people are feeling lonely, according to a study published in January 2020—even before the

COVID-19 pandemic started.

Social media users were the loneliest of all, [according to the Cigna study](#).

Building community

Lee says she sees a "cult of overachievement" among young people that is detrimental to a sense of belonging.

But despite all the market forces driving Gen Z to declare their individuality by purchasing hot shoes or a hotter car, her students increasingly are trying to re-imagine what it means to be successful, financially or otherwise.

"Students are not only worried about themselves, but about each other. They really want to see the world become more just and equitable," Lee says. "It's heartening."

The very hardships that Gen Z has faced—including economic challenges and the social isolation of the pandemic during their formative years—can help make them more resilient, says Lee, an expert on resilience who wrote "Worth the Risk: How to Microdose Bravery to Grow Resilience, Connect More, and Offer Yourself to the World."

It might take a little time and concerted effort "to look at what is working well in our lives, what resources we can tap into and how to nourish our mind and body," she says.

But Lee says it's worth it in unleashing a sense of joy in life and feeling of vitality that are, in effect, synonymous with youth.

Overcoming suffering, she says, "can help us have a renewed spirit," and that's true at any age.

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