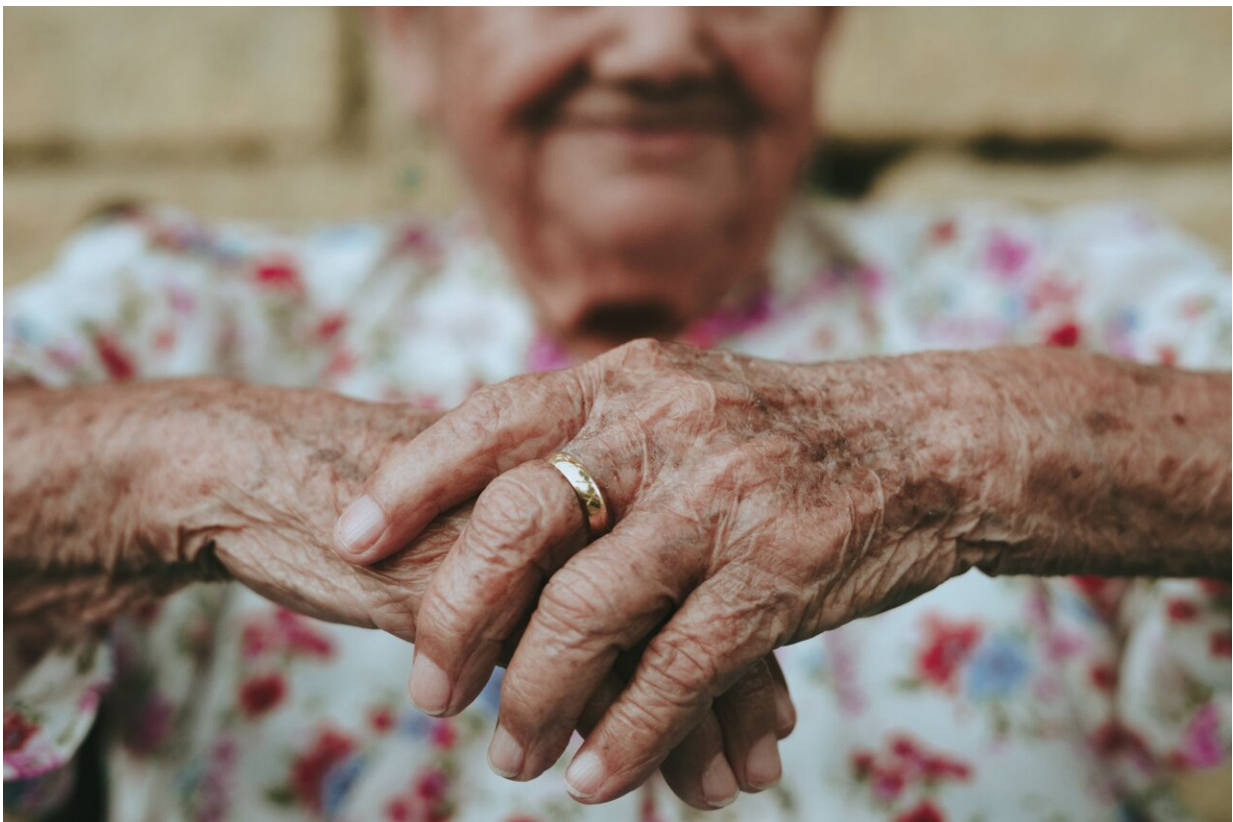


Defying global trends: Study finds high happiness, low depression among oldest Americans

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The oldest North Americans are among the happiest in the world despite increased depression and loneliness among their peers in other regions,

according to a recent University of Michigan study.

Published in the *Journal of Aging and Health*, the [research](#) highlights significant global variation in well-being among older adults, with European and North American populations generally reporting higher happiness than those in Asia.

The findings underscore the unique factors contributing to older adult well-being in the United States, challenging previous assumptions about aging and happiness.

Researchers analyzed 2018 data from nine countries and regions in the Health and Retirement Study international family of studies (n = 93,663), comparing age group differences in [depression](#), loneliness and happiness.

"The unique contribution of this research is that we incorporate self-reports of well-being from a diverse sample of countries and regions," said lead author Shane Burns, a postdoctoral fellow at the Population Studies Center at U-M's Institute for Social Research. "We expected to find that the 'oldest old' generally report higher rates of depression and loneliness, but also greater rates of happiness, than their younger, aging peers."

Previous studies have shown mixed results about whether the oldest old report higher rates of depression and loneliness than their younger aging peers. The rate of older adults with depression in the U.S. tends to increase with age, according to the CDC. Risk factors for loneliness and late-onset depression include widowhood and living with illness or disability.

Earlier studies have also identified a "well-being paradox" among [older adults](#), in which, in spite of poor health outcomes, subjective well-being

does not decline.

Global variation

The new study examined psychosocial well-being differences between the young old (65–74), the old-old (75–84) and the oldest old (85+), with attention to variation across India, China, Mexico, Korea, Europe and the U.S. The investigators used economic, social, and health indicators to understand differences in reported happiness, loneliness, and depression.

Overall, happiness among European and North American populations (England, the U.S., Mexico) far exceeded the happiness reported among Asian populations (China, Korea, India) in this study. At the far ends of the spectrum, the data provided some support to the idea that happiness is correlated with national income and standard of living—though Mexico and China don't neatly fit that pattern.

The 'oldest old'

The researchers found that the oldest old had higher depression and loneliness in Southern Europe. The oldest old were notably less happy in Korea and, in a novel finding, more depressed in India. The study also found less depression and greater happiness among the oldest old in the United States, compared to young old adults (65–74).

"The oldest old's lower rates of depression in the U.S. were interesting because it counters what we found in the other countries and regions in our sample," Burns said.

"The exceptional psychosocial well-being of the oldest old in the U.S. partly hinges on their ability to perform activities of daily living. And their exceptional happiness may reflect differences across generations.

It's possible that the timing of the Great Recession, for example, affected the [happiness](#) of American Baby Boomers nearing retirement."

Aging and well-being

It's also important to note that these data do not show within-person changes in well-being over time, as the analysis looks at age group differences among respondents surveyed in 2018.

"This doesn't mean that aging populations in the U.S. should expect a bump in well-being in future years," Burns said.

Protective factors for depression and [loneliness](#) in the U.S. among the oldest old included education, marital status and, in particular, the ability to perform activities of daily living.

"Aging brings a host of challenges where we might expect to see well-being decline," Burns said. "The oldest old experience a range of factors related to health and cognition, bereavement, [economic challenges](#), gender inequalities, age discrimination, changing roles and family ties.

"These vary significantly by country and region, so understanding the causes, effects and contexts of variation for each age group will help us understand how to attend to the psychosocial needs of aging populations."

In addition to Burns, co-authors of the study are Eileen Crimmins, Mutian Zhang and Jennifer Ailshire of the University of Southern California. Burns was formerly a postdoctoral scholar at USC's Leonard Davis School of Gerontology before joining the Population Studies Center as a postdoctoral fellow.

More information: Shane D. Burns et al, Psychosocial Well-Being

Differences Between the Young Old, Old-Old, and Oldest Old: A Global Comparison, *Journal of Aging and Health* (2024). DOI: [10.1177/08982643241264587](https://doi.org/10.1177/08982643241264587)

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