

# How to Find Happiness At Any Age

What floats our boat changes as we get older. Here, science's take on our well-being

by Lindsay Van Gelder



Photograph: Dan Saelinger

Things change, even good things. If you had asked my younger self what made me happy, a lot of my answers would have related to proving myself: succeeding in a mostly male profession, mastering foreign languages, getting an A in natural childbirth. I doubt I would have mentioned long friendships or good health, which I took for granted, like the air I breathed, and I'm certain that religion and nature would not even have made my list. Today, decades later, the foundations of my contentedness are still work, travel and children, but I no longer worry much about proving anything to anybody. Like most other people (and this has been confirmed in study after study), I've found it easier to grab happiness as I've gotten older—sometimes by appreciating things that were once barely on my radar.

You could call this wisdom, I suppose. But as it turns out, I also got a special boost from growing up in a time of prosperity. According to research published earlier this year in the journal *Psychological Science*, your well-being is affected not just by your age but also by the era in which you were born. The study analyzed 30 years of data from two major surveys involving several thousand people. The researchers were originally surprised that many older people seemed less happy than the middle aged, says Angelina Sutin, one of the study's authors and an assistant professor of medical humanities and social sciences at Florida State University College of Medicine. "The data made it look as if well-being were going down," flying in the face of other evidence that happiness rises with age.

Puzzled, the researchers next looked at the generations as a group. The length and breadth of the sample allowed them to see if there were differences between people who turned 60 or 70 in 1980 and those who did so in 1995, 2010 or any other year. "After we crunched the data, it emerged that the unhappy older people tended to be those who grew up during the

Depression,” says Sutin. “They *did* get happier as they got older, but they started at a much lower baseline.” Those Depression babies never recovered from that initial deficit—a reason to be concerned that millennials, struggling in today’s difficult economic times, may also be absorbing a blow to their lifelong happiness.

Of course, you can’t choose the year you’re born. But as you age, you can pretty much count on life getting better . . . although the experts aren’t sure why. There is the theory that experience counts. “You get more realistic,” says Corey L.M. Keyes, professor of sociology at Emory University. “You get to a point where you realize that a lot of your dreams haven’t come true... and that’s fine. You stop thinking you have to be the leader of your company. Or you realize you don’t have the perfect family, but you know what? The kids are OK.”

Some neuroscientists believe we grow happier at least in part because of changes in the frontal lobes of our brains. Teenagers whose lobes are still developing and older people whose lobes have started to deteriorate tend to discount bad news and believe it doesn’t apply to them—which makes them happier. But where does that leave people in midlife? The unfortunate answer is: at the bottom of a happiness trough. This notion—that midlife is harder than the years that come before and after—has serious support in the world of social science. A study of half a million adults in 72 countries, published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, found there’s a well-being “U-bend” in almost every culture: carefree young people, a lot of contented seniors and dismay in the middle. The turn may happen at different times in different societies, but the bobby pin shape remains consistent. (The authors have subsequently documented that there’s a similar midlife happiness dip for chimpanzees and orangutans.)

Another big study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found the same U-bend in a survey of 340,000 Americans ages 18 to 85. When researchers teased out the numbers to look at different emotions along the curve, they were able to paint a nuanced picture. Anger is at its highest in 18- to 21-year-olds; stress peaks at 22 to 25. Enjoyment hits bottom at 42 to 45; worry is at its highest at 46 to 49. And happiness reaches its low point at 54 to 57. The study also revealed that stress, worry and sadness were all considerably higher for women than for men.

That may be part of a troubling trend. Female happiness has declined since the 1970s, according to a provocative study from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Note the researchers: “Women no longer report being happier than men and in many instances now report happiness that is below that of men.” The study controlled for many factors—having or not having a job, a partner or children—and the gap persisted. (Black women’s happiness, however, has followed a slightly different trajectory: In 1972 they reported being less happy than black men, unlike white women, who were happier than white men.)

If you’re in your fifties, feel free to cheer up: Your life will probably only get better. If you’re in your thirties or forties, then, sorry, things may get worse before the sun comes out. How soon life improves depends partly on your own attitude. If you accept that maybe you’ll never be a

member of Congress or open for the Boss, you can shake off a lot of stress and angst. Then go outdoors and admire the stars. "Happiness is best thought of as a skill," says sociologist Christine Carter at the University of California, Berkeley. Another quick route to happiness: Try to be realistic about your kids. "Modern parents have really high expectations that our own parents didn't have for a level of involvement in our kids' lives, and they take their children's failures very personally," says Carter. She advises her Gen X clients to think less about micromanaging their kids' happiness and start concentrating more on their own.

Here's my own unscientific summary: In your thirties, happiness is about other people. In your forties, those other people are driving you crazy, and you're miserable. In your fifties, some of those relationships have resolved—your kids may have launched themselves, you may have left a bad marriage or learned to trust a good one. Then come the sixties, when life is about you again. Happiness, in its many forms, is quite a ride.