

Sustainable Satisfaction: How Aging Makes Your Mind More Charitable

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Unless you've got a few million bucks in the bank, the power of a philanthropic family can seem almost limitless. When Émile B. Cartier launched the [Foundation de Hoop Cartier](#) in 1964, the diamond heir brought worldwide clout and mounds of cash to bear on problems that wouldn't appear to have much direct bearing on the jewelry trade, development of third-world countries, scholarships for scientists and health care workers. And de Hoop Cartier is just a single example -- some of America's richest men have begun offering [jaw-dropping](#) donations as they enter their golden years.

What is it that draws so many of us to community causes as we age? Is it just an excess of wealth that inspires philanthropy, or are our brains actually learning to perceive our relationships with the world around us in different ways?

Part of the answer may be that as we grow older, we're also growing more satisfied with what we already have. According to one [recent study](#), our overall opinions of our own well-being, our relationships and our career status tend to rise later in life -- and not just for those who've spent the past few decades clawing their way to the top.

As the journal *Psychological Science* [reports](#), a team led by Angelina R. Sutin of Florida State University College of Medicine compared survey data from several thousand respondents over a 30-year period. Though earlier researchers had interpreted this data to imply that happiness peaks in middle age and declines from then on, Sutin and her colleagues analyzed the data in a different way: Instead of tracking each person's satisfaction levels across the same series of years, the researchers tracked each individual's satisfaction ratings over time.

People born around the turn of the twentieth century, the team found, reported low levels of life satisfaction throughout their early decades -- much lower, in fact, than those reported by many modern respondents during any stage of their lives. Even so, their happiness tended to increase in proportion to everyone else's -- even if it never reached the same peaks. As the study puts it, "participants tested more recently had higher well-being, but time of measurement ... did not change the shape of the trajectory." If Sutin's analysis stands up to scrutiny, it would seem that just about everyone's satisfaction with life tends to increase over the years. Encouraging news for anyone facing a birthday with a "9" at the end.

Other neurological changes can also play a part in our tendency to age charitably. For instance, generous behavior patterns tend to [reinforce themselves](#). Acts of generosity trigger rewarding feelings in our brains -- and those feelings can be [just as strong](#) as the ones you'd experience if

you'd given a reward to yourself. Enjoyable sensations help guide the formation of connections between neurons -- so every time you perform a generous act, you're physically rewiring your brain to think more generously.

Psychological studies, meanwhile, have found strong correlations between people's reported happiness and their sense of connectedness to their surrounding community; which means that the more you reach out to [your social network](#), the more contented you're likely to feel about your own life. Cynical as it might sound, even a negative social experience can serve as a reminder of how you want to avoid behaving -- which, in turn, can inspire you to help someone who's getting picked on.

One of the strangest things about generosity is that its self-reinforcing pattern doesn't seem to be limited to any one level. The act of buying a meal for a friend can trigger similar feelings -- and brain activity -- to the act of making a million-dollar donation to charity. But as Sutin and her team discovered, the best gauge of whether you're improving with age isn't some society-wide average -- it's the shape of the path you're walking yourself.