

With Age Comes Happiness

By [Maia Szalavitz](#) Feb. 18, 2013

Wisdom may come with age, but does happiness follow suit?

Some studies show that the elderly may be more prone to depression and loneliness, which can lead to higher rates of unhappiness, not a surprise given the health and emotional challenges that tend to accompany aging. But increasing, more and more studies suggest that happiness may actually rise after middle age — at least when scientists take into account some of the non-biological factors that can influence reports of contentment.



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In a new [study](#), which was published in *Psychological Science*, researchers led by Angelina Sutin of Florida State University College of Medicine examined data from two large samples of people; one included nearly 2,300 primarily white and highly educated people with an average age of 69 living in a Baltimore community between 1979 and 2010. The second group included reports of well-being collected in the 1970s from a representative sample of some 3,000 adults from the U.S. population who were in their late 40s and 50s at the time of the study.

Sutin and her colleagues were particularly interested in exploring whether differences in happiness reported by different generations — the middle-aged vs. the elderly, for example — were related to factors that have nothing to do with aging itself, but rather reflect life situations reflecting when they were born.

For instance, growing up in tough economic times might reduce the sense of well-being of an entire generation— and if this group is compared to younger folks who got their start in better times, being older might seem to cause a decline in happiness, when instead, the older people were actually less happy because they were unable to overcome the effects of early adversity.

When the researchers adjusted for the influence of such generation-wide life experiences, says Sutin, “Well-being may increase with age and also across generations. Those born during the early part of the 20th century had lower levels of well-being than those born more recently. Once we accounted for the fact that people grew up in different eras, it turns out, on average, people maintain or increase their sense of well-being as they get older.”

This suggests that previous studies that compared people across generations measured a decline in well-being that was mis-attributed to aging, and was actually due to initial differences in happiness, related to events such as the Great Depression and ongoing improvements in longevity and health.

People born in 1940, for example, scored nearly 3 times higher on measures of well-being related to the time period immediately preceding the survey (responses to items like “I enjoyed life” and “I was happy”), compared to those born in 1900.

What does that mean for the current generation, which is facing another difficult recession with high unemployment and wage stagnation? “The ... [r]ecession was certainly devastating for many people. Too many people lost their jobs and their homes and the repercussions are still being felt,” Sutin says.

And those consequences may leave a lasting legacy. “The extent to which this recession will have a long-lasting effect on well-being is an open question at this point. A number of longitudinal studies have shown that after periods of unemployment, well-being does not quite recover to pre-unemployment levels. When unemployment is widespread, as was the case during the Great Depression, the well-being of a whole generation may not recover.”

Fortunately, however, even those born in tough times will see some rise in happiness with age — or at least they won’t become unhappier. Although the change is not as large as the difference in happiness that comes from being born in a better time, it is measurable and occurs consistently. “[R]elative to their starting point, all of the cohorts increased rather than decreased in well-being with age,” the authors write.

So why do we tend to think of older people as primarily depressed and unhappy, a perception that seems to be supported by the fact that the elderly have the highest suicide rates, when they themselves often report being happier now than when they were younger — and when studies show well-being rises after mid-life?

One reason for the happiness and suicide rates being at-odds could be related to the fact that happiness ratings often rely on general population figures, not measures of particular individuals, which can be much more varied. As data from several Scandinavian countries shows, it’s possible for a country to lead the world in both population happiness and suicide rates. While the reasons aren’t clear — perhaps the cold, dark winters are difficult to take for some, or perhaps being depressed when everyone around you is happy is even harder to take — the conflicting trends do occur simultaneously.

“It does seem like a paradox, but both happiness and depression can increase with age,” says Sutin. It is possible to swing between the two states and it is also possible that age pushes people to one extreme or another. “With age, people tend to become more emotional and experience both sadness and happiness,” she says. That could account in part for why we tend to see the elderly as sad: the sadness is both more visible and more congruent with our expectations about this stage of life.

“Especially when we’re young, it’s really easy to look at older adults and see the loss: loss of youth, loss of mobility, loss of loved ones,” Sutin says. “We assume that all of that loss would make older adults unhappy. It’s harder to see the benefits of aging: feelings of pride for children and grandchildren, a meaningful career, more confidence, wisdom. There are a lot of reasons to be happy in older adulthood, but they may not be as visible as the losses.” When they are, however, it turns out that happiness is one of the benefits that come with age.

Read more: <http://healthland.time.com/2013/02/18/with-age-comes-happiness/#ixzz2M1Tf5nhE>