

Our Sense of Well-being Increases with Age

I have good news. Not only is old age not an illness, but for most of us it's also a happier time than our younger years. Research has found that most of us develop an increased sense of well-being in our later years. Public opinion research studies have asked people of all age groups from 15 to 85 to rate their "sense of well-being." Graphs of their findings revealed "the u-shaped

On the Senior Agenda



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curve." Teenagers' sense of life satisfaction is high; it curves gradually downward until bottoming out between ages 45 and 50, and then rebounds continuously upward to at least age 85. This has proven true in many countries, and among different cultures and income levels. There are exceptions in countries or places where aging is difficult due to poverty or lack of health care.

There are some caveats. First, these were studies of large groups of people, and not everyone's life satisfaction increased as they aged. Certainly some people with severe illnesses or disabilities aren't happy--- but that's not most seniors. Second, some researchers suggest that perhaps unhappy people or people with serious health problems in these samples died younger, thus skewing the sample being surveyed. But even when sampling was adjusted for these factors, there was still a clear positive effect on well-being as people aged.

No one knows the reasons for the "u-curve", so theories abound. One is that it's related to work life. As we begin careers, work takes up more and more of our time, and is often accompanied by increased responsibilities and stress. Then in our 50's our income

has increased, and after our children have grown, in our 60's and beyond we enjoy

cedures and remedies for conditions that are relatively rare for seniors, tries to

teering or continuing to do work or activities that we love--- these are what bring

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more leisure time and financial security.

Another theory is psychological. We start off with high hopes, by mid-life the reality of our income and life satisfaction sets in, and then ultimately we adapt to our life situation as we age and appreciate our situation isn't so bad.

Ageism feeds off mass media that continue to feature unhappy, incompetent, and silly seniors as stock characters. A barrage of ads for expensive drugs, assistive devices, medical pro-

convince us that we're very sick (or will soon become so.) The fact that most of us are happier in old age radically contradicts that.

One study I found helpful described three dimensions contributing to well-being at any age: our moods and feelings in our daily lives, our assessments of our lives as a whole, and the extent of purpose and meaning in our lives. Enjoying simple pleasures on a daily basis, reflecting on our life's body of work, and finding purpose and meaning in volun-

most of us greater happiness as we age. We need to acknowledge to ourselves and remind each other that we've "never been happier" and we have the research to show it!

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