

The U-Shaped Curve and the Pandemic

I have good news. Not only is old age not an illness, but for most of us seniors it's also a time of greater contentment and sense of well-being than our younger years. World-wide social science research has verified that statement. I want to make an important distinction about what I'm talking about. I think contentment and sense of well-being refer to longer-term states of mind, that are based on reflections on our past as well as present lives, while happiness is an emotional state that comes and goes for everyone.

Public opinion 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 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 places where aging is difficult due to extreme 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 don't feel contented---but others do. 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, but theories abound. One is that it's related to work life, at least for some of us. 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 more leisure time and financial security. Unfortunately, that's not true for quite a few seniors.

Since the u-curve holds up with seniors across a range of incomes, a theory I find more appealing is psychological adaptation. We start off with high hopes, by mid-life the reality of our income and life situation sets in, and then ultimately we

adapt as we age and appreciate our situation isn't so bad. It certainly matches my own experience of aging.

I wonder how the Covid epidemic has affected our sense of well-being compared with younger people. I can only speculate, but I think the U-shaped curve still holds up. Talking to fellow seniors, I find we share concerns about avoiding situations risky for our health. Some of us miss seeing our grandchildren who live in distant states, and worry about their health. Yet having already lived through other difficult and uncertain situations: the impact of the Vietnam war, the Great Recession, loss of beloved friends and relatives, health problems, we realize that "this too shall pass."

One study described three dimensions contributing to a feeling of 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 volunteering or continuing to do work or activities that we love--- these are what bring most of us greater contentment as we age.

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Published in The Senior Digest, October 2020