

# Older But Happier? 5 Amazing Findings from Recent Research

Incredibly, whoever dubbed old age "the golden years" was right!

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I celebrated a big birthday recently. I won't say *which* birthday, but let's just say it was big enough that from now on I'm going to think twice before I buy anything in quantity. Keeping up with the latest research on how to age happily and healthily has become of even more vital personal interest to me than it already was.

When I think of "old age," my mind focuses first on a host of possible ills, from inconveniences like an achy back to serious diseases and disabilities, not to mention the looming "Big D"

out there. But much as I like to whine about getting older, I must say I am far happier than at any other point in my life. So I've been wondering: Am I an oddity or do other people feel happier as they enter the "golden years," too? And, if not, is there anything they can do about it?

Fortunately, my personal experience appears to reflect a general pattern. Here are 5 recent studies that provide fascinating glimpses into the cozy relationship between aging and happiness. Use the specific happiness tips at the end of each study to raise your odds of contentment as you age.

## 1. In general, surveys show that older people are happier people.

Polls of people at different ages in 149 countries reveal a startling pattern. When asked to rate their life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, most adults in their early 20s reported fairly high happiness levels, with a gradual fall-off as they approached midlife. Adults reported being *least* happy in mid-life, roughly between the ages of 39 and 57, with the happiness low point at age 50.

Here's the most surprising part: As they aged, older adults rated their life satisfaction much higher, with happiness ratings rising gradually and steadily from age 50 through the decade of the 90s. Researchers are calling this process the "U-curve" of happiness. When put on a graph, the results actually form a lop-sided smile. (Check out the graph here in Jonathan Rauch's *Atlantic Monthly* piece.)

The data leave room for a variety of interpretations. Maybe knowing our days are numbered helps us savor them even more. But whatever the explanation, "... studies show quite strongly that people's satisfaction with their life increases, on average, from their early 50s on through

their 60s and 70s and even beyond—for many until disability and final illness exact their toll toward the very end.”

*Exact their toll.* Old age certainly is not all sweetness and light. But this counter-intuitive survey research gives cause for optimism. If we do feel happier past age 50 and beyond, then it makes sense to stay healthy so we can enjoy our older years. There’s truth in the old saying, attributed to composer Eubie Blake: “If I’d known I was going to live this long, I’d have taken better care of myself.”

So Step One is...live long enough to get old.

**What you can do:** If you aren’t happy, just wait a few years. You’ll be happier! Meanwhile, take good care of yourself.

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## **2. Older people find happiness in the “ordinary” things. Young people seek extraordinary**



**experiences—experiences that are novel, exciting, and provide bragging rights. By contrast, older people can find happiness in the so-called ordinary experiences of life—familiar, peaceful, and predictable events. Seniors tend to stop pining for that fabulous trip to the temples of Cambodia and enjoy the small pleasures of a meal at a new restaurant or a visit from a friend.**

Of course, this generalization does not apply to everyone. Think of President George H.W. Bush, who famously celebrated his 90th birthday by skydiving out of a plane. Nonetheless, as a general rule, older adults find themselves increasingly delighted by daily-life experiences.

It’s encouraging that even with limited finances or impaired health, our waning days can be filled with happy moments, as *New York Times* money writer Ron Lieber points out here.

**What you can do:** Learn to savor the small moments of your day. Remember that happiness is an “inside job.”

## **3. Meaningful relationships, even online relationships, add to happiness among the aging.**

Psychologist Laura Carstensen and her colleagues write: “As people age and time horizons grow short, people invest in what is most important, typically meaningful relationships, and derive increasingly greater satisfaction from these investments.” In line with this observation, research suggests that even online connections can lower the risk of depression in retired people by as much as 1/3 compared to those who do not go online.

**What you can do:** Cultivate relationships that matter. Send cards and emails, make calls, and arrange get-togethers. Join one social media site.

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#### **4. Volunteering is a pathway to happiness for many older adults.**

People like to feel useful. That's why 2-3 hours per week of volunteering can bring a host of happiness and health benefits in its wake (more than 2-3 hours/week has no additional benefit). After examining 73 studies on aging, researchers concluded that volunteering was associated with a lower risk of depression and a higher feeling of well-being among people 50 and older. They also found health benefits such as greater longevity and better overall health. People who volunteer also developed new relationships, itself a predictor of happiness in older-aged people (see #3 above).

**What you can do:** Decide on a type of volunteering that fits your personality and values. If you dread your volunteer work, you've made the wrong choice. Choose again! If you don't want a volunteer job, think about friends or family who could benefit from your regular help or attention. Or, if you love your profession, just keep working.

#### **5. Decide on a purpose for your golden years.**

Some elders experience a decline in their sense of purpose in life as they age, but this feeling is by no means inevitable. Protective factors against feelings of isolation and loss of meaning can include volunteer work, frequent contact with family, and continued employment, among others. "Purpose" may even be protective of your brain health, according to PT blogger Maclin Stanley. He cites research that indicates that "people who have a greater sense of purpose in life are more likely to have slower rates of mental decline, even as plaques and tangles develop in their brains. Purpose has also been linked to decreased mortality and happiness in old age...."

In fact, setting and reaching achievable and worthwhile goals leads to happiness, whatever your age.

**What you can do:** Decide on a "purpose project." Your project could range from writing your memoirs for your grandchildren to a social action project. Or, if your purpose in retirement is to have more fun, do that! My wonderful, people-loving aunt enjoyed herself until her last day of life at age 95, when she told the hospice nurse to call her lady friends and cancel her bridge game. Because my aunt had so much fun, she invigorated everyone around her. The gift of fun is priceless!

As I re-read this blog, I still find it hard to believe that there's such a strong correlation between aging and happiness—even though it's true of me! Old stereotypes—and stereotypes about the

old—die hard. But the truth is more complex--and more hopeful. It's reassuring to know that our odds of happiness may actually increase as we pass through the portal to old age.

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