

Age Is Just a Number: Believe You're Younger and Your Health Will Follow

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Maybe age really is just a number. How young or old someone feels has a huge influence on their health and how other people view them. An article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reviews the research and suggests that feeling young can actually make you look young—and have the health of a younger person, too.

Harvard psychological scientist Ellen Langer has been studying how the mind influences the body for over three decades. In one classic study, she had old men live in a retreat that was retrofitted to look like it was 20 years earlier, while they pretended that they were living in that year. “Their minds were in the past. Their vision improved, their strength improved, and so on,” she says. Langer cowrote the new article with Laura M. Hsu of Harvard and Jaewoo Chung of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In one study by Langer and her colleagues, women had their hair cut and dyed at a hair salon, and volunteers looked at before and after pictures of the women. Those women who believed having their hair dyed made them look younger actually did look younger after the salon visit, according to the observers who were shown photos of their faces only. Women who didn’t believe they looked younger with dyed hair didn’t have that benefit.

Past research has found that male-pattern baldness increases the risk of prostate cancer. Langer and her colleagues hypothesize that this might be because balding men feel older; every day in the mirror, they get a stark visual reminder that they’re aging. (Prostate cancer is more common in older men.) Some heart problems are also linked with balding. There’s no clear biological reason for why hair loss and heart problems would go together; the men’s own feelings about their age could be partly to blame.

Older first-time mothers are often healthier as they age than women who have their first children younger—maybe, Langer says, because they’re spending their time with younger women at playgrounds and preschools. And people who marry older partners have a shorter life expectancy, while those who marry younger partners live younger.

So if Langer and her colleagues are right, and feeling young makes you healthier, what can you do about it? One route is to dress like a teenager, dye your hair, and find a younger boyfriend. But Langer has another solution: “Don’t buy the mindset in the first place. Then you won’t be vulnerable to it,” she says. “I think we have far more control over our health and wellbeing than most of us realize.”