

With Age Comes Happiness: Study Suggests Older Adults Have Better Emotional Control

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As people age, things fall apart. You can't read without glasses—or even with them. Bones weaken. You can't find your keys. And yet, people tend to become happier as they age. A new paper published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that this could be because older people are better at regulating their emotions.

“Older age gives us this really interesting so-called paradox: physically, you're falling apart, and yet people are doing well,” says Heather L. Urry of Tufts University, who cowrote the paper with James J. Gross of Stanford University. Scientists have suggested several reasons why older people might seem to be happier than we would think. One possibility is changes in the brain. Another is that we just aren't very good at guessing what will affect our happiness.

In this paper, Urry and Gross look at a third possibility: that older adults are better at emotion regulation. “I think a lot of people think that your emotional responses are just there and there's nothing you can do about it,” Urry says. But this is wrong; there are things we can do to change how we feel.

One way to change emotions is to change your situation. For example, if you are unhappy at work, you could figure out what is making you unsatisfied and change it—ask for a cubicle away from an annoying coworker, for example. Another is to think about your situation and reappraise it. “Let's say you get fired. If you were to interpret that as the end of the world, and you must be a failure, that would be one way of interpreting it,” Urry says. But you could also see it as a new opportunity or your employer's mistake. “You might still feel bad, but you wouldn't probably feel as bad.”

People seem to develop better skills for regulating their emotions as they age. For example, older people often have smaller and closer social networks than younger people; this may show that they're choosing to put themselves in pleasant situations with people they like. Studies have found that older adults pay more attention to positive information than to negative information, which may improve mood. Also, some evidence suggests that older people are better at predicting how a certain situation will make them feel, which gives them a better chance of choosing enjoyable situations and avoiding unpleasantness.

Urry and Gross propose that people may shift how they regulate their emotions over the course of their lifetime, perhaps by shifting to strategies that don't require as much quick thinking. Psychological scientists have yet to determine which mental resources are used to regulate emotion, Urry says; future research should focus on figuring out how people regulate their emotions and how that changes with age.