

# The Golden Years of Emotion

October 24, 2012



Susanne Scheibe

Are you a working parent who constantly feels stressed and irritated? Do even little events make you angry, causing you to snap at your partner or colleagues? Do you rarely get a moment of relaxation and peace? It does get better — eventually — you just have to wait until you get older. Although aging may bring various undesirable changes — forgetfulness, vision and hearing loss, declining health — the emotional changes tend to be positive. You will probably feel happier, calmer, and more balanced when reaching 60 and 70 than you did earlier in life — and lifespan researchers are making headway in understanding why.

## Emotional Experience at Older Age

A few decades ago, lifespan researchers made a surprising finding. In a time when models of aging as decline were still prominent, multiple research groups found that *affective* well-being is high across much of adulthood. As a group, older adults consistently report feeling more positive (happy, content, accomplished) and/or less negative (sad, angry, anxious) in their everyday lives compared with younger adults. This trend is observed in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies and across both global and momentary ratings of affect. Subsequent studies have further refined the profile of affective experience at different ages. In one longitudinal study across 10 years, led by APS Fellow Laura Carstensen of Stanford University, we used experience-sampling methodology (in which experiences are assessed multiple times each hour and day) to demonstrate that with age, emotional experience becomes more stable from one moment to the next, and also more complex, such that positive and negative states are

more often experienced at the same time.

Our research also points to another nuance of emotional-experience change, namely that emotional experience appears to be “calmer” in successively older age groups. In a different study, we examined affective reactions to the 2008 presidential election in people between the ages of 20 and 80 who voted for either Obama or McCain. In contrast to other studies measuring real-life emotional events, the presidential election was unique in that it was shared among, and equally important for, younger and older individuals. Unsurprisingly, 2 days after Obama was elected President, Obama supporters reported increased positive affect and McCain supporters reported increased negative affect. Yet the profile of affective reactivity differed according to age: The older Obama supporters were, the more likely they were to react with low-arousal positive emotions (e.g., relaxation), relative to high-arousal positive emotions (e.g., enthusiasm). In contrast, the older McCain supporters were, the less likely they were to react with high-arousal negative emotions (e.g., anger), relative to low-arousal negative emotions (e.g., sluggishness). These participants also “knew” that they would react this way. Their affective forecasts from the previous month showed largely the same age-differential pattern of affective reactions. Apparently, emotional experience tends to be “calmer” for older adults than for younger adults whether they are anticipating or actually experiencing reactions to emotional events.

When the positive trajectory of emotional aging was first discovered, it was so surprising that it was termed “the well-being paradox of aging.” It is a paradox when considering that the “usual suspects” of factors that drive young adults’ well-being — physical functioning and health, executive functioning, and social networks — are all subject to age-related decline. Why, then, do older adults experience high well-being? This apparent paradox has become a fascinating research question for many subfields of psychology, and there are currently three broad explanations that have been put forward: age-related changes in biology, motivation, and emotional competence.

## **Happy and Balanced as a Result of Biological Changes?**

The biology explanation maintains that degradation and functional slowing of emotion-relevant brain and autonomic systems make older adults less reactive to emotional stimuli. If the same negative stimulus generates less physiological reactivity in older adults, then it would be less of a challenge to their well-being. Thus, what is considered a loss in the biological sense would become a gain for well-being. However, these conditions might only apply to mild or moderate emotional stimuli that are experienced in everyday life. As Susan Charles of the University of California, Irvine suggests, once emotional stimuli are intense and enduring enough to arouse physiological systems, older adults could react more strongly to them. Moreover, neuroimaging studies show that emotion-relevant brain areas are fully activated in older adults under some experimental conditions.



## **Or the Result of Shifting Goals?**

The motivational explanation holds that older adults are more motivated than younger adults to downregulate negative affect. Assuming a situation in which both young and old react the same way to an emotional stimulus, both physiologically and subjectively, it is possible that young adults hang onto negative emotions to achieve their other goals, whereas older adults would attempt to defuse negative states quickly. In terms of broader self-regulation, emotion regulation would become the strategy of choice as opposed to strategies aiming to influence others or trying to change external circumstances. Laura Carstensen argues this occurs because goals shift as people realize they have only limited time left in life, and optimizing well-being in the current moment becomes a priority. Other researchers argue that these motivational shifts are a reaction to cognitive or physical decline and hence present a compensatory response.

In our recent work, we found that older adults prefer experiencing positive affective states that match their shifting emotional goals and self-regulation strategies. Namely, we found older adults increasingly prefer low-arousal positive states (such as calm) over high-arousal positive states (such as excitement). Note that low-arousal positive states are linked to appreciating the present rather than anticipating the future and also with increased pursuit of adjustment strategies. Moreover, we found that older adults' desired affect better matched the affect they ended up experiencing during a week of experience-sampling. Across all ages, those who had the best match between ideal and actual (low-arousal) positive affect reported the lowest desire to change their feelings — and the best health.

## **Or Are Older Adults Masters of Emotion Regulation?**

In a situation in which younger and older adults react similarly to an emotional stimulus and their emotion-regulatory goals align, it is still possible that younger and older adults differ in their success at attaining emotion-regulation goals. Studies suggest that in certain ways, older adults are “better” at regulating their emotions. Given the potential emotion-regulation strategies that one could employ, one's competence in emotion regulation could determine which strategies are chosen, how effectively they are implemented, and cognitive costs. Gross's model of emotion regulation identifies *situation selection* as the most proactive emotion-regulation strategy. To know which emotional situation to approach or avoid, it seems crucial to correctly forecast how different situations would make one feel. In the aforementioned study on the 2008 presidential election, we found that older adults were more

accurate in forecasting emotions than younger adults, but only if they were experiencing a win (the Obama supporters) and not if they were experiencing a loss. Among those experiencing a win, the accuracy of their predicting feelings was positively correlated with life satisfaction, which suggests that accurate forecasting for positive events supports global well-being.

Our work also suggests that emotion regulation has fewer cognitive costs for older adults. We showed participants a disgust-inducing film clip and subsequently asked them to downregulate their negative emotions while completing a working memory task. Older adults' working memory was found to be less compromised than that of younger adults. Although these data show that older adults can be more efficient in regulating emotions, we did not rule out the possibility that this effect occurs because the participants chose less cognitively demanding strategies. We are currently collecting data to better understand older adults' choices of emotion-regulation strategies in terms of cognitive costs.

## **And Where Are the Limits?**

Unfortunately, when a person reaches advanced old age, the upward trend in emotional well-being comes to a halt — and even reverses. Affect sharply declines several years prior to death, presumably because physical and cognitive declines are accumulating and negative events are harder to circumvent. Although older adults can manage mild, short, or circumscribed negative situations by employing such proactive (antecedent-focused) emotion-regulation strategies as avoidance or reappraisal, older adults may not effectively regulate emotions in response to highly intense, enduring, or unavoidable stressors. In such contexts, physiological reactivity is often enhanced, and poor executive functioning may diminish effective emotion regulation.

The well-being paradox is also not experienced by everyone. Personality traits such as neuroticism, mental illness, and extraordinary adversity might prevent positive emotional changes. Rates of aging in physiological systems also differ across individuals — as do changes in motivation — and emotional competence is acquired only to the extent that life experiences lead to learning. Individual differences will influence how our emotional lives change as we age. Notwithstanding these caveats, the good news is that high levels of emotional well-being are the rule rather than the exception in later adulthood. Thus, although the detailed processes underlying emotional aging still need to be fully untangled, for most people, old age is likely to be a happy and balanced time, rather than a grouchy and distressed one.