

Old as you want to be: Study finds most seniors feel younger

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Older people tend to feel about 13 years younger than their chronological age. That is one of the findings of a study forthcoming in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Science*. The researchers analyzed the responses of 516 men and women age 70 and older who participated in the Berlin Aging Study, tracking how their perceptions about age and their satisfaction with aging changed over a six-year period.

"People generally felt quite a bit younger than they actually were, and they also showed relatively high levels of satisfaction with aging over the time period studied," said Jacqui Smith, a psychologist at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR). Smith conducted the study with colleagues Anna Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn and Dana Kotter-Gruehn at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin.

"We examined individual changes over time, and expected the gap to increase. But we were surprised to find that it was maintained, on average. Perhaps feeling about 13 years younger is an optimal illusion in old age," Smith said.

Smith and colleagues found that some of the oldest participants did feel even younger over time. But poor health reduced the gap between felt age and actual age.

The researchers also assessed how old people thought they looked, asking them: "How old do you feel when you look at yourself in a

mirror?" They responded by selecting an age on a scale that ranged from 0 to 120 years. In general, at the start of the study people said they looked about 10 years younger than they were. By the end of the study, this gap had narrowed; people felt they looked only about seven years younger than their chronological age.

In general, women perceived their appearance as being closer to their actual age, Smith said. "Women saw themselves as about four years older than their male peers," she said. "There are several likely reasons for this gender gap in subjective physical age. One is that women may be more aware of their appearance than men, especially given the negative stereotypes of older bodies."

To assess satisfaction with aging, researchers asked participants to what extent they agreed with these five statements: "Things keep getting worse as I get older;" "I have as much pep as I had last year;" "As I get older, I am less useful;" "As I get older, things are better than I thought they would be;" and "I am as happy now as I was when I was younger."

Initially, men were more satisfied than women with their own aging. But over the six-year period studied, men's satisfaction decreased more than women's. Poor health magnified these patterns, Smith said.

According to Smith, examining changes in how people feel about the aging process in old age can provide important indicators about the resilience and vitality of the older self. In unpublished research based on the Berlin Aging Study, she and colleagues have found that people who feel younger are less likely to die than those who don't, given the same level of chronological age and equivalent physical health.

"Feeling positive about getting older may well be associated with remaining active and experiencing better health in old age," she said. "Thus, studies on self-perceptions of aging can contribute to our

understanding of potential indicators of resilience in older adults and the aging self."

Source: University of Michigan

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