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## How to find happiness at any age

What floats our boat changes as we get older. Here, science's take on our well-being. Plus, what you told us about your own ups and downs

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BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

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→ **Things change**, even good things. If you had asked my younger self what made me happy, a lot of my answers would have related to proving myself: succeeding in a mostly male profession, mastering foreign languages, getting an A in natural childbirth. I doubt I would have mentioned long friendships or good health, which I took for granted, like the air I breathed, and I'm certain that religion

and nature would not even have made my list. Today, decades later, the foundations of my contentedness are still work, travel and children, but I no longer worry much about proving anything to anybody. Like most other people (and this has been confirmed in study after study), I've found it easier to grab happiness as I've gotten older—sometimes by appreciating things that were once barely on my radar.

You could call this wisdom, I suppose. But as it turns out, I also got a special boost from growing up in a time of prosperity. According to research published earlier this year in the journal *Psychological Science*, your well-being is affected not just by your age but also by the era in which you were born. The study analyzed 30 years of data from two major surveys involving several thousand people. The

researchers were originally surprised that many older people seemed less happy than the middle aged, says Angelina Sutin, one of the study's authors and an assistant professor of medical humanities and social sciences at Florida State University College of Medicine. "The data made it look as if well-being were going down," flying in the face of other evidence that happiness rises with age.

Puzzled, the researchers next looked at the generations as a group. The length and breadth of the sample allowed them to see if there were differences between people who turned 60 or 70 in 1980 and those who did so in 1995, 2010 or any other year. "After we crunched the data, it emerged that the unhappy older people tended to be those who grew up during the Depression," says Sutin. "They *did* get happier as they got older, but they started at a much lower baseline." Those Depression babies never recovered from that initial deficit—a reason

Some neuroscientists believe we grow happier at least in part because of changes in the frontal lobes of our brains. Teenagers whose lobes are still developing and older people whose lobes have started to deteriorate tend to discount bad news and believe it doesn't apply to them—which makes them happier. But where does that leave people in midlife? The unfortunate answer is: at the bottom of a happiness trough. This notion—that midlife is harder than the years that come before and after—has serious support in the world of social science. A study of half a million adults in 72 countries, published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, found there's a well-being "U-bend" in almost every culture: care-free young people, a lot of contented seniors and dismay in the middle. The turn may happen at different times in different societies, but the bobby pin shape remains consistent. (The authors

That may be part of a troubling trend. Female happiness has declined since the 1970s, according to a provocative study from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Note the researchers: "Women no longer report being happier than men and in many instances now report happiness that is below that of men." The study controlled for many factors—having or not having a job, a partner or children—and the gap persisted. (Black women's happiness, however, has followed a slightly different trajectory: In 1972 they reported being less happy than black men, unlike white women, who were happier than white men.)

If you're in your fifties, feel free to cheer up: Your life will probably only get better. If you're in your thirties or forties, then, sorry, things may get worse before the sun comes out. How soon life improves depends partly on your own attitude. If you accept that maybe you'll never be a member of Congress or open for the Boss,

you can shake off a lot of stress and angst. Then go outdoors and admire the stars. "Happiness is best thought of as a skill," says sociologist Christine Carter at the University of California, Berkeley. Another quick route to happiness: Try to be realistic about your kids. "Modern parents have really high expectations that our

own parents didn't have for a level of involvement in our kids' lives, and they take their children's failures very personally," says Carter. She advises her Gen X clients to think less about micromanaging their kids' happiness and start concentrating more on their own.

Here's my own unscientific summary: In your thirties, happiness is about other people. In your forties, those other people are driving you crazy, and you're miserable. In your fifties, some of those relationships have resolved—your kids may have launched themselves, you may have left a bad marriage or learned to trust a good one. Then come the sixties, when life is about you again. Happiness, in its many forms, is quite a ride. »

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to be concerned that millennials, struggling in today's difficult economic times, may also be absorbing a blow to their lifelong happiness.

Of course, you can't choose the year you're born. But as you age, you can pretty much count on life getting better . . . although the experts aren't sure why. There is the theory that experience counts. "You get more realistic," says Corey L.M. Keyes, professor of sociology at Emory University. "You get to a point where you realize that a lot of your dreams haven't come true . . . and that's fine. You stop thinking you have to be the leader of your company. Or you realize you don't have the perfect family, but you know what? The kids are OK."

have subsequently documented that there's a similar midlife happiness dip for chimpanzees and orangutans.)

Another big study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found the same U-bend in a survey of 340,000 Americans ages 18 to 85. When researchers teased out the numbers to look at different emotions along the curve, they were able to paint a nuanced picture. Anger is at its highest in 18- to 21-year-olds; stress peaks at 22 to 25. Enjoyment hits bottom at 42 to 45; worry is at its highest at 46 to 49. And happiness reaches its low point at 54 to 57. The study also revealed that stress, worry and sadness were all considerably higher for women than for men.

## What you told us about happiness

For insight into what makes women happiest at different ages, we turned to *More's* readers, 350 of whom responded—with typical warmth, humor and moxie—to a survey posted on *More.com* from January 30 to February 25. Here's what you told us

### under 40s YOUTH AND POSSIBILITY

**THE DRUMBEATS** of this age are friends, husbands and love. There's a feeling that life is expanding—but the sense of possibility comes with a heavy dose of stress, guilt and fear of failure.

#### What consistently makes you happy?

- "Allowing myself a piece of candy every day . . . and not feeling guilty about it."
- "Hugging my children."
- "Journaling in the morning with a good cup of coffee."
- "Doing things for my husband."

#### What is most likely to disrupt your happiness?

- "Getting bad news at work. I'm in sales, and no matter how many times you've heard a client say no, it doesn't get any easier."
- "Loneliness."
- "Cleaning up after my husband and child."
- "Other people's drama."

#### What would make you happy 10 years from now?

- "Being debt free."
- "Being happily married with a fantastic career."
- "Moving to a warmer climate. Leading a slower life."

### 40s STRESS AND SUCCESS

**WOMEN IN THIS** age group are push-pulled and working hard. They say good-bye to drinking and partying; they newly value yoga, exercise and time alone.

#### What used to make you happy that no longer does?

- "Shopping. Now I feel guilty about it, and that sure spoils the fun!"
- "I used to spend a lot of time with 'friends' that I had little in common with beyond all of us having young children. Now I spend time with people I have a stronger connection with."
- "My body. Age has not been kind."

#### What makes you happy now that never used to?

- "Children! For years I said I would never have them. Now I have three of my own and three stepsons. I find such unexpected joy in the things they say and do."
- "Tracking our credit score and seeing it go up as I take control."
- "Simple pleasures, like watching the sun rise, that I never noticed before."
- "Putting my phone on vibrate and ignoring it."

### Feeling unhappy? Just wait a few years

Average happiness rating by decade, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being highest:



Under-40s: 6.1



40s: 6.5



50s: 6.9



60s: 7.7

### 50s OLD FRIENDS, NEW STARTS

**THESE WOMEN** miss the time when their parents were alive. They speak of surviving illness and finding new life in a second marriage. Grandchildren, religion and solitude start to figure larger.

#### Think about the time in your life you were happiest. Why did you feel that way?

- "My partner of over a decade was alive."
- "Finding the most wonderful person in the world to love and be loved by."
- "I was done with a bad relationship; my mother was in pretty good health; my lovely daughter was about to go away to college."
- "Being alive—I am a cancer survivor."
- "It's now, when I feel as if I have my act together and can cope with anything."

#### Has money ever made you happy?

- "I love to go on trips with my hubby! Having money for travel is what makes me happy. I would love to give money away, too."
- "I was married to a rich alcoholic for too long to believe that."

### 60s GRATITUDE AND GRACE

**SIXTY-SOMETHINGS** wrote with pleasure about their good health, grown kids and old friends. "My husband and I have been married for almost 43 years," said one, "and he is my best friend."

#### What is most likely to disrupt your happiness?

- "Stressful phone calls from grown children."
- "Dealing with chronic illness, never knowing what I'll be able to do."
- "Things that disrupt the flow of my day. I am learning to 'go with the flow' better."
- "There is nothing that can disrupt my daily happiness."

#### What are you hoping for that you believe will make you happy?

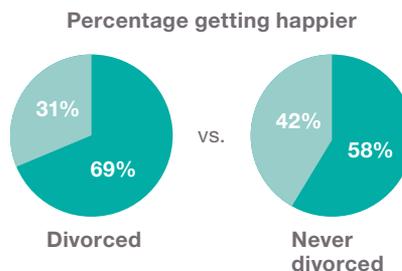
- "A longer time with my husband."
- "The happiness of my children."
- "Recovering from my chronic depression."
- "Having no debts to leave behind for my family to be burdened with when I pass away. That is my main goal in life at this moment."

### Are you sure money can't buy happiness?

In our survey, people with the highest household income (more than \$150,000 a year) also had the **highest average happiness rating (7.4)**.

### The divorce dividend

Among our respondents, 69 percent of divorced women said they are getting happier, compared with 58 percent of the never divorced.



### For a happiness boost, buy a plane ticket

What activity makes most of you happiest? Travel! It held the top spot among women up to age 59 and dropped to second place for those in their sixties (who rated spending time with friends as number one). ©