

Want to Enjoy Life? Research Says to Skip Your 40s

Last week media around the world reported the findings of a study conducted by researchers at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom and Dartmouth College in the United States. The study, which was extensive, is reported in *Social Science and Medicine*, published by Elsevier. It involves data obtained from two million people in 80 countries during the past 30 years. The data were derived from two multi-decade surveys of happiness and satisfaction completed by approximately 500,000 American and Western European men and women, four administrations of the “World Values Survey” conducted between 1981 and 2004 in North America, Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Central and South America, and a 2004-2007 survey of one million Britons.

I have not had the opportunity to read the actual study or review the research instruments that were used. However, as I searched for information on the internet, I was fascinated by the various accounts of and responses to this study reported in newspapers and magazines. I was also struck by the headlines that accompanied these stories, headlines that provide a sense of the major findings of the study. The following are a sample:

“Middle-Aged? Join the Misery Club”

“Depression: 44 Age Most at Risk”

“Happiness Curve Bottoms Out at 44”

“Middle-Aged Misery Spans Globe, Study Says”

“It’s Official: Happiness Resumes at 50”

“Aging Really Is Depressing (Until 50)”

“Middle Age a Low Point for Most: Study Found Age 44 Marked the Peak of Depression for People Around the Globe”

“Midlife Misery: Is There Happiness After the 40s”

“The Midlife Crisis Goes Global”

“More People Fight Depression in Mid-Life”

“Mid-Life Crisis: Unhappily There’s No Escape”

As I reviewed these somewhat ominous headlines, my initial reaction was a sense of happiness that I was no longer in my 40s. I must admit I don’t remember feeling very depressed during my 40s, although my memory of the past may be failing now that I am in my 60s.

Barbara Miller of ABC News in Australia summarized the results of the study in an article she authored, noting:

“Those approaching middle age like to think that life begins at 40, but research suggests that just a few years later we are at our most depressed. Scientists from the United States and the United Kingdom who studied happiness and depression levels in 80 countries, have pinpointed 44 as the most unhappy year of life. But they say we shouldn’t get down about it, as many 70-year-olds are as happy and healthy as young adults.”

Miller continues, “Happiness is a U-shaped curve according to the research. As middle-age approaches, the average person will slide down the U to hit rock bottom at the age of 44. They’ll be stuck in that trough for quite a few years but by the time they are in their 50s, assuming their physical health is intact, their happiness levels will go up and risk of depression goes down.”

Interestingly, while the probability of depression peaked at about 44 years of age for both men and women in the United Kingdom and other countries in the study, there was a large gender difference in the United States, the only country to display such a difference. Among women in the United States, unhappiness was strongest at age 40, while for men it was about 50. In reviewing a number of summaries of the study I could not find a reason offered for this significant gender disparity in the United States.

As was highlighted in several of the media accounts, the U-shape findings dispel the view that people become increasingly unhappy as they reach their elderly years. This should not come as a surprise if one reads, for example, the research findings reported in one of my favorite newsletters, *The Positive Aging Newsletter*. The data derived from many studies indicate that older adults are not beset with melancholy but actually discover greater satisfaction and peace in their later years. Please see my January, 2005 website article that summarizes some of these research findings.

In a review of the current study of mid-life unhappiness that appears in *Scientific American*, author Lisa Stein writes, “So what’s at the root of this depressing dip? Not sure, say authors Andrew Oswald of Warwick University and Dartmouth’s David Blanchflower, both economists. They speculate as Oswald put it, that ‘something happens deep inside humans’ to bring us down rather than shattering events (such as divorce or job loss), because it tends to

creep up on us over time. Some people suffer more than others, but in our data the average effect is large. It happens to men and women, to single and married people, to rich and poor and to those with and without children. Nobody knows why we see this consistency.”

Oswald adds, “What causes this apparently U-shaped curve, and its similar shape in different parts of the developed and even often developing world, is unknown. However, one possibility is that individuals learn to adapt to their strengths and weaknesses, and in midlife quell their infeasible aspirations. Another possibility is that cheerful people live systematically longer. A third possibility is that a kind of comparison process is at work in which people have seen similar-aged peers die and value more their own remaining years. Perhaps people somehow learn to count their blessings. By the time you are 70, if you are still physically fit, then on average you are as happy and mentally healthy as a 20-year-old. Perhaps realizing that such feelings are completely normal in midlife might even help individuals survive this phase better.”

Stein cautions that while “other studies have shown similar such curves in many countries, there are exceptions; it has been reported that in some places middle-aged folks are quite happy. In fact, reaching middle age in some parts of the world is considered something to be proud of.”

In an article by Barbara Miller in ABC News of Australia, Professor Ian Hickie from the Brain and Mind Research Institute at the University of Sydney, concurs that life appears to improve in the late 40s. “Certainly the evidence we’ve got is if there is a time in your life you’re going to be miserable and complain about it, it’s mid-life. When you’re young you’re hopeful, you’re optimistic, despite the difficulties and as you age what you have to look forward to is actually better mental health. Contrary to most people’s ideas, getting older doesn’t get with going more miserable and having more troubles. It actually correlates with better coping with life and feeling better about your life. It seems the middle years are the killers. You just got to survive the middle years.”

I believe that the notion of “surviving the middle years” possesses a tone of resignation or victim mentality. Resignation must be replaced with an understanding of factors that can contribute to feelings of happiness and lessen sadness. As someone who has been interested for more than 25 years in the topic of nurturing resilience throughout the lifespan, I was especially drawn to one response to the Oswald and Blanchflower study that appeared in a *U.S. News and*

World Report article written by Alan Mozes. The quote resonated with a key point that my colleague Sam Goldstein and I advance in our book about resilience in adults, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*.

In our book we emphasize that individuals are more likely to be resilient, to cope with and bounce back from challenges and adversity, and to experience greater satisfaction when they display an attitude of “personal control.” That is, they focus their time and energy on those situations in which they have influence, rather than attempting to alter conditions over which they have little, if any, control. These resilient individuals recognize that if they base their happiness on having someone else change first (e.g., if only my husband or wife was more loving, if only I had a better boss, if only my kids listened to me more), they may wait forever to be content and in the meantime continue to be frustrated, resentful, and unhappy. Resilient people are those who appreciate that they are the authors of their own lives and if they are not happy with a situation, they ask, “What is it that I can do differently, what new attitude and behaviors must I adopt, rather than wait for the situation or someone else to change first?”

In the *U.S. News and World Report* Dr. James S. Goodwin, director of the Sealy Center on Aging at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston says, “It’s a very hard lesson for us to learn that happiness is not tied to the things, such as wealth, that we think it’s tied to. At the same time, there’s no doubt in my mind that wisdom and knowledge increase with age, and that just gives older people more control over their lives. A lack of control, like someone in midlife worrying about their teenage kids going out for a drive, is the cause of a lot of distress. But usually that does go away. Eventually. And what replaces it is experience with how to control your temper, deal with grief, cope with intimidation. And that knowledge can lead to a more positive outlook. And greater happiness.”

In my January, 2005 website article, I cite a study reported in *The Positive Aging Newsletter* that is worth noting again. Yael Benyamini and Jacob Lomranz in Tel Aviv interviewed 423 older adults who were forced to give up various activities such as soccer, volleyball, and back-packing because of their physical condition. The editors of the newsletter note, “As might be anticipated, the research indicated a strong association between the loss of activity and expressions of depression. However, for a large sub-sample of the group this correlation did not hold. These people had located alternative activities to replace those that had

been lost. Some who loved to play ball on the beach learned to enjoy jogging or growing vegetables. For this group the feelings of well-being were essentially the same as for people in full health.”

In essence, people chose alternative behaviors because they realized that while they had little, if any, control over the changes in their physical condition, they did have control over their attitude and adjustment towards these changes. Rather than bemoan the loss of certain physical abilities, they learned to adapt in a realistic and healthy way to their circumstances.

I would not be surprised if during the next few months there will be a spate of articles analyzing and questioning the research methods and findings of the Oswald and Blanchflower study. Whatever the questions may be, the study serves to place a spotlight on examining variables that are associated with both sadness and happiness at different points in our lives. Oswald observes, “Some might find it helpful simply to understand the general trends of mental health as they go through their own life. It might be useful for people to realize that if they are low in their 40s that this is normal. It is not exceptional. And just knowing this might help.”

Oswald’s comment reminds me of the saying, “Knowledge is power.” However, the power resides in not just knowing that our mood may be more vulnerable to depression in our mid-40s, but in taking steps to alter that possibility. While some may argue that the study indicates that the negative mood associated with mid-life shall naturally pass, I believe we can adopt a proactive approach to lessen the emergence of a negative outlook and to cope more effectively with negative emotions when they do appear. As Sam Goldstein and I emphasize in *The Power of Resilience*, throughout our adult lives we can take steps to reinforce a “resilient mindset” by focusing on the development of personal control, changing negative mindsets and self-defeating behaviors, enriching our connections and relationships with others, learning from but also letting go of past events that burden us, and identifying realistic short-term and long-term expectations and goals that are in concert with our values.

Experiences at all ages provide us with opportunities to strengthen a resilient mindset, preparing us to confront life’s many challenges. I hope that Oswald and Blanchflower’s research does not result in an acceptance of the inevitability of depression in the mid-40s, but rather serves as a catalyst to understand how best to lead a resilient lifestyle filled with satisfaction. We have more of a choice in the outcome of our lives than many realize.

One of my favorite quotes that captures the power we have to shape our attitudes and behaviors comes from George Bernard Shaw. I would like to end with this quote.

“People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don’t believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can’t find them, make them.”