

## Life Satisfaction and Age

How Does Life Satisfaction Change During an Individual's Senior Years?

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## Introduction

At a young age, people seek external happiness in the form of material physical pleasure. However much pleasure a particular clothing item or even a dessert provides, the happiness lasts for a fleeting moment and only causes frustration later when another new craving ensues. In *The Book of Joy*, Douglas Abrams (2016) summarizes the evanescent quality of physical pleasure in a simple analogy: “The first bowl of ice cream is sublime, the second bowl is tasty, and the third causes indigestion” (p. 55). By chasing after the desirable feelings gained through the first bowl of ice cream, the ice cream is no longer pleasurable but painful by the third bowl. Consequently, by the time people reach an older stage of living, the things that satisfied their desires during youth and early adulthood may not have the same impact, causing them to seek pleasure and enjoyment through other means. This change in perspective of life satisfaction occurs in what researchers call a U-bend of happiness (Dobewall & Realo, 2011, para 2). The U-bend begins with one peak in life satisfaction during youth, a nadir during middle-age, and another peak at old age (The Economist, 2016, para 2). Research in this phenomenon of elderly people being as happy, if not happier, than youth is divided into three central spheres of focus: economic, psychological, and religious. Life satisfaction has been shown to increase as a result of changes in these three spheres of influence after middle-age. For example, senior citizens are working later into their lives, affording them a consistent income for a longer period of time. Also, life satisfaction has a psychological change in perspective. After middle-age, life satisfaction ceases to be achieved solely through material gain and

physical pleasure but through having what the Dalai Lama (2016) calls “a genuine sense of love and affection” (p. 54) for your family and others. In addition to this, a larger amount of personal time during retirement often allows individuals to deepen their religious and spiritual practices, giving them a renewed sense of purpose even after their working years. Alas, despite the misconception that life satisfaction decreases as people grow older, research shows that life satisfaction increases after middle-age as a result of increased economic stability and mental stimulation, less focus on material wealth and physical pleasure, and intensified spiritual and religious practices.

### **Economic Stability and Mental Stimulation**

To begin, life satisfaction increases as one transitions beyond mid-life as a result of a changing economic situation. This is due to the heightened level of financial security most senior citizens experience across a variety of countries. In countries like Canada, a pension usually begins to factor in when an individual turns 65 (Government of Canada, 2020). The result of this pension is that when it is paired with savings, financial security becomes less of an issue, allowing individuals of age to unwind and reap the benefits accumulated by a long stretch of hard work. Moreover, Nicole Maestas (2018), an associate professor of health care policy at Harvard Medical School, explains that people are reaping the benefits of working later in life as “many people have less physically demanding jobs in today's information economy” making it “easier to continue working” (para 4). Similarly, a 2016 study published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* (as cited in Harvard Health Letter, 2018), which consisted of a sample size of approximately 3000 people, indicated a possible connection between working one year or more after the age of retirement and a 9% to 11% lower risk of dying during the

18-year study period, regardless of health. To compliment this potential health benefit, working beyond the retirement age allows an individual to sustain a consistent income for a longer time and enjoy a greater amount of savings when they do decide to retire. Based on these findings, extended working years adds to life satisfaction as research shows that it can limit the deterioration of health and thereupon sustains an individual's quality of life. Forbes cites a paper from 2010 by economists Susann Rohwedder of RAND and Robert Willis of the University of Michigan which "concluded that retirement had a significant negative impact on the cognitive ability of people in their early 60s" (Forbes, 2017, para 5). This view is further supported by Dr. Daniel Levitin, a neuroscientist at McGill University who quips that "[i]f you want to live a satisfying, long life...stay busy....Too much time with no purpose *is associated* with unhappiness" (as cited in Levitin, 2020). This conclusion supports the suggestion that being kept busy by work for an extended period of time provides the mental stimulation required for the maintenance of cognitive function during one's senior years. Overall, by working further into the retirement age, research hints that life satisfaction can at least be maintained or even increased during an individual's older years due to the financial security and mental stimulus it provides.

### **Less About Materialism and Physical Pleasure**

Furthermore, the philosophy of life satisfaction changes in an individual's senior years, be it consciously or unconsciously. According to social psychologist Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson, satisfaction lies not in what waits ahead but in savouring what you already have. This notion is summarized in her statement that later into adulthood, an individual's "happiness has evolved, just as [they] have. Even though [their] version seems less fun by the standards of [their] younger selves, that doesn't mean it's less

good” (Halvorson, 2013, para 13). Building on Halvorson’s message on the evolution of happiness, in *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama (2016) describes modern materialistic life satisfaction as being “mainly concerned with sensory experiences” (p. 53). He provides the example that “so long as the music is playing, they feel happy” (Gyatso, 2016, p. 53). The Dalai Lama (2016) advises people “to pay more attention to the mental level of joy and happiness. Not just physical pleasure, but satisfaction at the level of the mind” (p. 54). He explains that where physical pleasure is temporary, the level of mental happiness attained by “develop[ing] a strong sense of concern for the well-being of all sentient beings and in particular all human beings” lasts longer and is consequently superior (p. 54). To contrast the Dalai Lama’s message, Abrams (2016) references the age-old outlook of life as a *hedonic treadmill*, the scientific term “for the unsatisfactory nature of pursuing pleasure alone” (p. 55). This way of living has revealed itself to be unsatisfactory and unsustainable as “scientists have found that the more we experience any pleasure, the more we become numb to its effects and take its pleasures for granted” (p. 55). In the same stream of thought, Dr. Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, reveals that the brain has four independent circuits that affect long-term well-being: the first circuit pertains to “our ability to maintain positive states”, the second circuit revolves around “our ability to recover from negative states”, the third circuit is associated with “our ability to focus and avoid mind-wandering”, and the fourth circuit encompasses “our ability to be generous” (as cited in Abrams, Gyatso & Tutu, 2016, p. 56). This last circuit is responsible for the satisfaction people gain when they support and assist others. In other words, by loving and treating others kindly, as the Dalai Lama stipulates, life satisfaction is elevated. This last point is especially applicable to

the older population that achieves life satisfaction by guiding younger members of the population from their wealth of experience. The Dalai Lama's ideology relates to that expressed by Halvorson as the more sustainable mental level of happiness begins to overshadow the fleeting, materialistic happiness that the Dalai Lama warns against with age. By comparing these insights, it can be noted that life satisfaction increases after middle-age due to this older population transitioning from material-based and physical pleasure-focussed sources of life satisfaction to a more mature one that is a result of the loving interpersonal and familial connections that the individual has established over time.

### **Intensified Religious and Spiritual Practices**

Lastly, life satisfaction in the world's older population increases due to an intensified devotion to spirituality and religion among many seniors. The Pew Research Center correlates religious devotion with increased life satisfaction in a 2019 report indicating that "actively religious people are more likely than their less-religious peers to describe themselves as 'very happy'" (para 3). For instance, in the United States, "36% of the actively religious describe themselves as 'very happy', compared with 25% of the inactively religious and 25% of the unaffiliated" (Marshall, 2019, para 3). According to Subramuniaswami (2008) of Kauai Hindu Monastery, the mind nor the spirit deteriorates with time; "it is only the physical body that is slowly dissolving into the essences from which it came" (para 27). Subramuniaswami also highlights that although work-related responsibilities subside during an individual's senior years, the additional time afforded can be channeled into other outlets such as religious service, strengthening the individual's connection with God (para 38). By relating Subramuniaswami's religious insight to the research done by Pew, one can better understand how religious and spiritual

advancement can lead to an increase in an individual's life satisfaction. It lies in the fact that retirement allows senior citizens to invest more of their time towards religious and spiritual areas of living they may have neglected in their busier years. Through heightened religious and spiritual practice, these individuals often volunteer through organizations like church groups. By volunteering with these groups, senior citizens fill the void of unproductive time in their daily lives, working instead towards a common goal with other like minded individuals, establishing connections with others and feeling fulfilled as a result. As is stated by Bryan Walsh (2016) in the TIME excerpt article, *Does Spirituality Make You Happy*, "some experts think that believing in a religion gives you a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life than a secular viewpoint alone does, and that can help carry you through the low periods and elevate the higher ones" (para 6). Retirement can often be a difficult time for a senior citizen's mental health. The constant workload of employment grants individuals a sense of purpose which is often lost during old age. It is during times like this when an individual can delve into religious and spiritual activities that give direction to their retirement. In short, heightened religious and spiritual practices leading into and after retirement are factors that raise an individual's life satisfaction due to their ability to provide people with a sense of purpose, even without a physical profession.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that old age restricts an individual's ability to engage in the activities enjoyed during youth, life satisfaction increases. This is due to an overall change in perspective of what boosts an individual's life satisfaction. Today, many senior citizens are working further into retirement, allowing for a consistent income later in life and a consequent expansion of savings. This allows an individual to divert their attention from stressful financial matters toward activities that they find meaningful. Additionally,

life satisfaction for older individuals becomes less about attaining physical pleasure and material wealth but holding the genuine love for all living beings of which the Dalai Lama speaks. At this later stage of life, caring for family members and guiding other young community members from experience replaces the untenable form of life satisfaction achieved through the purchase and collection of material goods with a more wholesome and sustainable one. Lastly, additional personal time affords retired individuals or those nearing retirement to focus on advancing religious and spiritual practices, which, according to Pew Research Center, could possibly lead to greater life satisfaction. This is due in part to the increased purpose religious commitments and activities provide in addition to their calming, inward focus. In summary, life satisfaction increases after middle-age and throughout an individual's senior years due to increased economic stability and mental stimulation, a decreased attachment to material wealth and physical pleasure, as well as intensified religious and spiritual practices. Although an individual's senior years mark the increasing proximity to their eventual departure from this physical state of being, research on the subject of life satisfaction during old age suggests that this demise is not something that is greatly feared. In the short documentary, *Big Daddy's Last Dance*, Caitlyn Greene (2016) captures the essence of a jazz funeral in Tremé, New Orleans. The sweeping sentiment of this exuberant procession is that an individual's passing is not something to mourn in the typical sense of the word but to celebrate as it is a time to reflect and appreciate the lasting, positive impression the deceased individual left before they died.

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