

## The Happiness Equation

**Why getting older equals a more blissful life**

By [Beth Levine](#) Posted August 01, 2008 from [Woman's Day](#)

I recently turned a certain age. (Okay, I'm 50...ish. Deal with it.) At first, I was stunned by the number, but after taking to my bed and summoning the restorative powers of Girl Scouts Thin Mints cookies, I realized something very important: I love my life and I wouldn't return to my youth even if I could.

The teenage years, when who sat with whom in the cafeteria took on operatic proportions? My 20s, when I had no idea why I was put on this planet? Oh, please. Once was plenty. It may be the sugar rush talking, but give me a choice and I'll take the present for \$200, Alex.

The accepted perception is that life gets crummier as we age. That we turn into the crabby lady with 20 cats. The funny thing is, though, when I asked other women of a certain age how they felt about getting older, they all said the same thing: "My life is so much better now!" We've learned a little something about birthdays: With each one life becomes sweeter.

"People generally do get happier as they age," says Laura Carstensen, PhD, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. "There is a split between reality and perception. I call it the misery myth. People expect to become less happy as they grow older, yet our studies show that the frequency that one feels sad or angry declines, and when negative emotions do occur, they don't last as long."

### **Mind over misery**

So what's the reason for our bliss boost? The brain, for one thing. With a few years on it, the mind magically helps us diminish the negative. Over time the amygdala, the part of our brains that processes emotions, physically changes how it reacts to negative stimuli, explains Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, director of The Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University Medical Center.

We also live more in the present. When we're younger and perceive our future as limitless, we pursue long-term goals—advancing our careers, saving for a house. When we're older, however, we see our future coming up fast, so we focus more on goals we can fulfill now, notes Dr. Carstensen. And instant gratification equals instant joy.



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