

Accentuating the positive—why older people are happier

Information processing functioning steadily declines starting when people reach their 20s. But as people get older, they get better at regulating their emotional health, according to psychology professor Laura Carstensen, PhD, founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity at Stanford University. She described that model of aging at the Henry and Bryna David Lecture at the National Academy of Sciences Nov. 14 in Washington, D.C.

Besides the lecture, which is funded by an endowment recognizing innovative research in the behavioral and social sciences, Carstensen's paper is published in the journal *Issues in Science and Technology*, Winter 2007 issue.

While acknowledging cognitive losses that come with age, Carstensen pointed out that older people gain by building expertise in different subjects and, with practice, can pick up new knowledge just as quickly as younger people.

Psychological research about people's cognitive experience as they age has gained importance because the average life span has increased from 47 years in 1900 to 77 in 2000.

Carstensen attributed the life expectancy surge to various factors, including developments in nutrition, a clean water supply, garbage collection, sewage treatment systems, vaccinations and the prevention of communicable disease.

"We designed a world in which young people thrive," she said. The side effect of more children surviving childhood is healthier adults thriving into their 70s and 80s, she said.

Carstensen's larger theory of how the growing group of elderly lives out its final decades is tied to socioemotional selectivity theory, which holds that people's goals and cognitive functioning are tied to their awareness of where they stand in the life span.

Younger people explore new experiences with the belief that they've got plenty of time to spare and long, nebulous futures to prepare for. They are often willing to tackle any cognitive task just for the challenge. But for an older person, the timeline shrinks with the awareness of impending mortality. Greater attention is paid to seeking emotional rewards through meaningful activities, she said.

In one series of studies, Carstensen, along with Susan Turk Charles, PhD, and Mara Mather, PhD, presented younger and older participants with a series of positive, negative or neutral images. The results showed that while younger adults remembered both positive and negative images, older people recalled more positive images than negative images. In another test, when presented with photos of people either smiling or scowling, older people remembered the smiling faces more quickly, she said.

That selective attention to the positive might explain why older people report the least amount of distress in day-to-day life, are less likely to be depressed and experience lower rates of phobia than younger people do, she said.

Given that older people focus on the positive, Carstensen said researchers can find ways to better present information to older adults making important decisions, such as health plan enrollment. Describing what a health plan covers, as opposed to what's not covered, would be an example of that approach, she said.

—C. MUNSEY