

**The Wall Street Journal**

# **To Age Well, Change How You Feel About Aging**

**Negative stereotypes about getting older can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. How to improve your mind-set—and well-being.**

By Anne Tergesen

October 19, 2015

Scientists are discovering something very peculiar about aging: How we *feel* about getting old matters. A lot.

In test after test, researchers are finding that if we think about getting older in terms of decline or disability, our health likely will suffer. If, on the other hand, we see aging in terms of opportunity and growth, our bodies respond in kind.

Scientists are discovering something very peculiar about aging: thinking about getting older in terms of decline or growth can dictate how our bodies respond. WSJ's Anne Tergesen has details on Lunch Break With Tanya Rivero.

That research holds out the possibility for much healthier aging. But it also points to a very big obstacle: Negative stereotypes about aging are pervasive in America. Even many older adults embrace the idea that getting old is a bad thing—which means they're doing potentially serious harm to their health without realizing it.

Can we change the way we feel about aging—and improve our prospects for healthier senior years? A growing body of research offers hope.

Psychologists and neuroscientists are identifying strategies that individuals can use to improve their mind-sets about aging, with benefits for their health and well-being. In [a recent study](#), for example, researchers at institutions including the Yale School of Public Health found that older individuals who were subliminally exposed to positive messages about aging showed long-term improvements in self-image, strength and balance. Other recent studies have shown that it's possible to achieve similar results with tactics that psychologists, cognitive therapists and educators use to [treat depression](#), [combat race and gender bias](#), and break people of harmful habits, such as smoking.

Negative stereotypes about aging “are a public-health issue,” says Becca Levy, an associate professor of epidemiology and psychology at the Yale School of Public Health and lead author of the Yale study. “What people aren’t aware of is that they have the ability to overcome and resist negative stereotypes” and “compensate for the ill effects of automatic ageism.”

With that in mind, here are four ways people can better protect themselves from the potentially harmful effects of stereotypes about aging.

### **1. Understand the myths vs. the facts**

Experts say the first step in overcoming negative stereotypes about aging is simply to understand how they work and recognize just how debilitating the consequences can be.

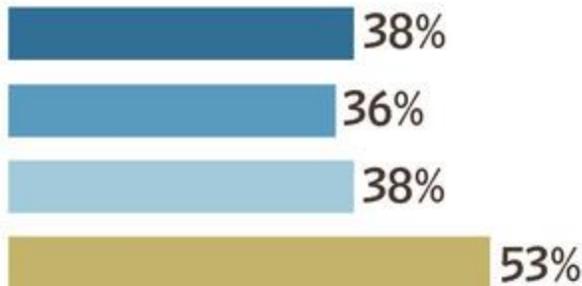
Stereotypes in general—negative and positive—are entrenched in part because they help us take cognitive shortcuts. By offering a way to “automatically categorize people into social groups,” they allow us to “free up mental energy to” live our daily lives, says Michael North, an assistant professor of management and organizations at New York University’s Stern School of Business. “If we were to try to make sense of everything and everybody we encounter, we wouldn’t have enough attention left over to be functional human beings.”

# Myths vs. Reality

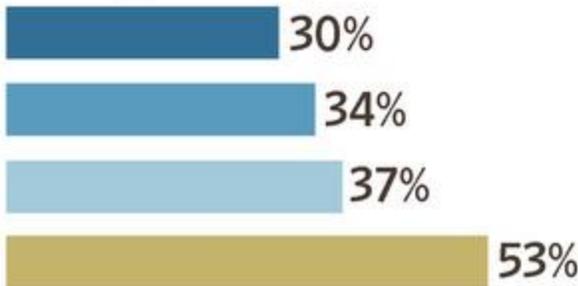
Aging is typically associated with decline. But many older adults report a better quality of life than younger adults. The percentage of people who said they are “thriving” in the following categories:

■ 18-29 years   ■ 30-44 years   ■ 45-64 years   ■ 65-plus

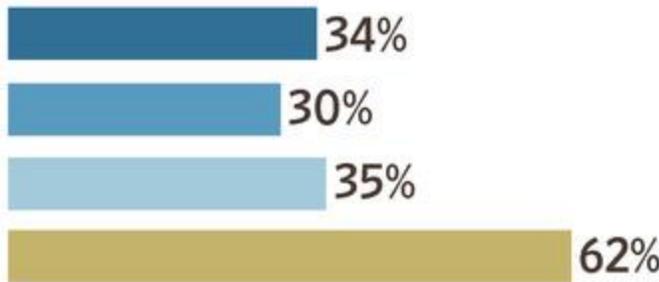
**SOCIAL** | Having supportive relationships and love in your life



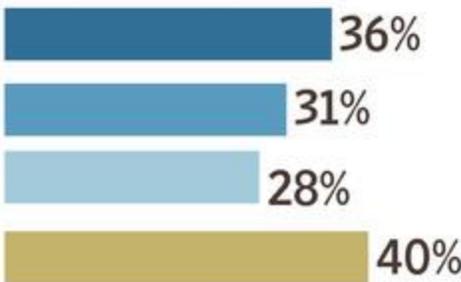
**COMMUNITY** | Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community



**FINANCIAL** | Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security



**PHYSICAL** | Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily



Source: Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index telephone survey of 85,145 adults, Jan.-June 2014; margin of error +/- 1 percentage point      THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Some stereotypes about older adults are positive: the kind grandparent; the elder statesman; the spry matriarch. But “in most Western societies, the perception of age and aging is predominantly negative,” says Dana Kotter-Gruehn, a visiting assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Scientists aren’t sure exactly how holding negative stereotypes affects health, but they say it’s clear that there is a connection, and it isn’t simply correlation. In test after test, negative stereotypes have been shown to lead to poor health results. Over the past two decades, dozens of [studies](#) from psychologists, medical doctors and neuroscientists have shown that older people with more [negative views](#) of aging fare more [poorly on health](#) than those with less-pessimistic attitudes.

Even when study participants have similar health, education levels and socioeconomic status, those with more negative outlooks about aging show greater declines in a variety of areas over time. They have [shakier handwriting](#), [poorer memories](#), higher rates of [cardiac disease](#) and [lower odds of recovering](#) from severe disability, according to studies by Prof. Levy. They are less likely to eat a [balanced diet](#), exercise and follow instructions for taking prescription medications as they age. They even [die younger](#)—the median difference in survival rates is 7.5 years.

None of which is to say that some negative views of aging aren’t true. We certainly can experience declines in physical strength as we age, and our senses tend to weaken, too. But it’s important to realize that many other things that are broadly accepted just aren’t true.

For example, far from feeling more depressed or lonely than younger people, older people tend to express [greater satisfaction](#) with their relationships. Some studies have found that, at work, older workers [make fewer errors](#) than their younger counterparts. And research suggests that [memory](#) can be [enhanced](#) in old age.

The lesson: While most people assume aging can be explained entirely “as a physiological process,” Prof. Levy says, “beliefs about aging, which are taken from the culture, have an impact.”

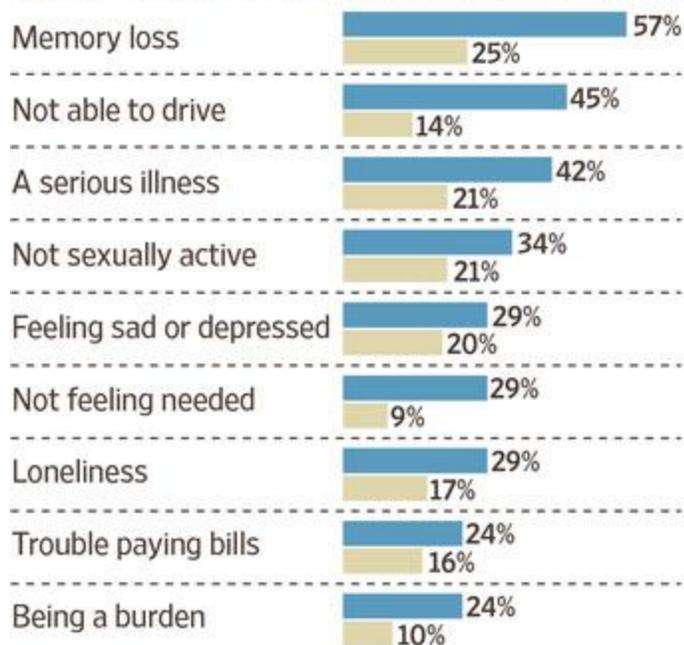
Education, then, is a start: getting beyond myths about aging and, equally important, understanding (as a growing body of research indicates) that our moods, relationships and overall sense of well-being actually can *improve* with age, as can knowledge and certain types of intelligence.

A forthcoming study demonstrates that education alone can have a big impact on how we look at aging. Psychologists at Colorado State University conducted an experiment aimed at improving attitudes about aging among 62 sedentary adults, ages 53 and older. Over the course of a month, the participants attended two-hour weekly classes aimed at debunking age stereotypes and received instruction in ways to set achievable fitness goals.

## Problems? What Problems?

Many people assume they will face setbacks in later life, but many older adults find that isn't the case

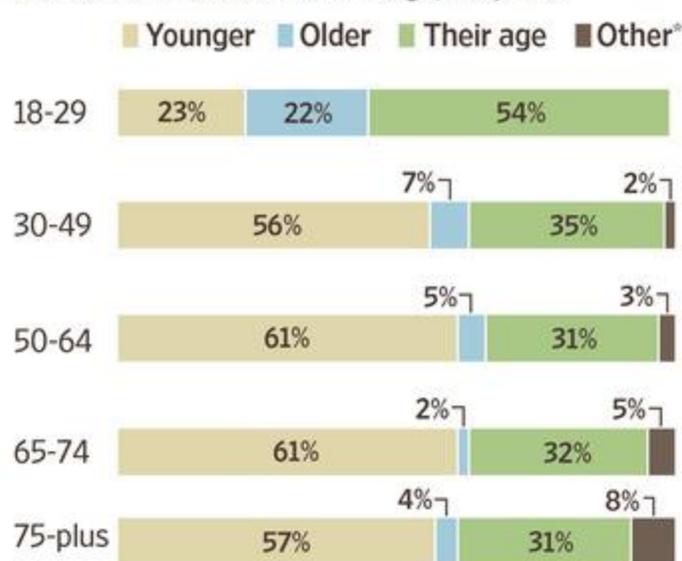
■ Ages 18-64 expect... ■ Ages 65-plus experience...



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## Looking in the Mirror

The percentage of respondents by age who said that relative to their current age, they feel:



\*"Don't know" or "refused" responses

Source: Pew Research Center telephone survey of 2,969 adults, 2009; margin of error +/- 2.6 percentage points

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The findings: "People's negative views on aging became much more positive," says Manfred Diehl, a co-author and professor of human development and family studies at Colorado State. The participants also increased their levels of physical activity in the two months over which they were monitored afterward.

## 2. Recognize stereotypes in everyday life

Once you're aware of the power of stereotypes, it's important to be aware of just how pervasive they are. Again, that isn't to say that none of the messages are true. But we are bombarded by one view of aging without being aware of it, so paying attention is an important way to lessen the impact.

Studies show that negative stereotypes about aging—for example, that older people inevitably grow less productive and more depressed—are as pervasive as they are inaccurate. On television, older adults are often absent or "provide comic relief by displaying physical or mental incompetence," Prof. Levy wrote in a [2005 study](#) of 76 television watchers that showed, among other things, that those who watched more television had more negative "images of aging" than less-frequent viewers.

More recently, she and other researchers examined 84 Facebook groups that included descriptions of people ages 60 and older. On all but one, [they found](#) that negative stereotypes

predominated, with 27% of the site descriptions “infantilizing” older adults and 37% advocating “banning [older adults] from public activities,” such as shopping.

“Because there is no PC backlash against it,” ageism is often “overlooked as a form of prejudice,” says Prof. North in New York.

Prof. Levy recommends keeping a diary. In the 2005 study of television viewers, researchers asked about half of the 76 participants to evaluate in writing the physical and cognitive health of older television characters. The other half were asked to simply record the names of the shows they watched. After a week, the scientists surveyed both groups. Those who wrote the detailed evaluations were significantly more aware than the other group was of how elders are presented, the study says.

It’s also important to acknowledge our own prejudices, says Ashton Applewhite, author of the blogs [“This Chair Rocks”](#) and [“Yo, Is This Ageist?”](#)

Before you conclude you don’t have any, take the Implicit Association Test. Harvard University publishes an [online](#) version, which psychologists use to measure bias by gauging how quickly test-takers associate pleasant versus unpleasant words with young and old faces.

The next step is to become more aware of your own thoughts about older people and aging. One thing to guard against: a tendency to “blame things automatically and reflexively on age,” says Ms. Applewhite.

Many older adults automatically attribute physical and health problems to aging, rather than to specific causes that might be treatable. For example, Type 2 diabetes is not caused by age but by a poor diet, lack of exercise and other factors, many of which can be addressed. Others chalk up occasional memory lapses to “senior moments,” rather than to disorganization or busyness; in contrast, someone in their 20s who constantly loses his or her keys would never attribute that to age.

Blaming everything on age can “reinforce negative stereotypes in ourselves” that equate aging with decline, says Mary Lee Hummert, a professor at the Gerontology Center at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kan.

A growing number of organizations are pointing out prejudices and stereotypes and helping people overcome them. [ChangingAging.org](#), a nonprofit based in Ithaca, N.Y., sponsors initiatives including “Age of Disruption Tour,” a show currently traveling the country that mixes music with lectures about overcoming aging stereotypes.

### **3. Substitute positive for negative stereotypes**

But being aware of negative stereotypes isn’t enough. [Research shows](#) that negative stereotypes about aging have a much stronger influence over older adults than positive ones—so it’s important to learn to emphasize the good side of aging.

In recent years, researchers have begun identifying techniques people can use to interrupt negative thoughts about stereotyped groups as they arise—and substitute more positive thoughts.

In [a study](#) published in 2012, researchers at the University of Wisconsin used a combination of techniques to see whether they could reduce the biases of 91 undergraduates.

After taking the Implicit Association Test, the 91 participants—90% of whom demonstrated more negative associations with black than with white people—were divided into two groups. One group was enrolled in a 45-minute training session, while the other wasn't given any specific instructions.

Those enrolled in the training session were taught about bias and its consequences and given several techniques designed to substitute positive for negative stereotypes and images. For example, the scientists asked participants to look for examples of people in stereotyped groups who don't fit the stereotypes. Participants were also instructed to “think about what it would be like” to be a member of a stereotyped group and to try to have contact with and “obtain specific information” about the individuals in those groups whom they encountered.

“We explained that if they were motivated to eliminate bias, they could learn and then practice the various bias reduction techniques,” says lead author and psychology professor Patricia Devine.

Eight weeks later, all 91 took the test again. Those assigned to the training program showed a larger increase in concern about discrimination and also dramatically less bias than those without it, says Prof. Devine, who believes the same results would hold for age stereotypes. “It is important to harness the power of the conscious mind to overcome bias of all sorts,” she adds.

#### **4. Accept the aging process**

All that said, it's important not to go overboard and expect an entirely positive experience of aging. The key is to hold both positive and negative in balance and really understand and own the aging process.

On average, individuals ages 40 and older report feeling 20% younger than their actual ages—a tendency that can serve a useful psychological purpose.

“By distancing yourself from your age, you also distance yourself from negative age stereotypes,” says David Weiss, assistant professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York.

But age denial can also leave us vulnerable to the harmful impact of negative age stereotypes down the road—for example, if we suffer a disability or are confronted by evidence that others view us as old, experts say.

Moreover, “denying one's age may be psychologically harmful in that it disassociates us from various important developmental tasks that should take place in later life,” says Prof. Weiss.

The solution may sound trite, but experts say it's crucial: "To embrace aging—both the good and bad," says geriatrician Bill Thomas, co-founder of ChangingAging.org.

Dr. Thomas says it's important to look not just at the negative changes that take place as we age but also at the positives, such as the improvements scientific studies have shown over time in our interpersonal skills, relationships, expertise and knowledge. While it's important to accept the negatives—you may, for example, no longer be the runner or tennis player you once were—that doesn't mean you cannot adapt your game or find other outlets with similar payoffs.

Recent studies point to other techniques we can employ to become more satisfied—or less dissatisfied—with our age.

[Research by Prof. Weiss](#), for example, concludes that identifying with one's generation, such as baby boomers' being proud of the differences they made in the culture, is a way to "embrace a more positive conception of older age" and link people "to a positive social identity or legacy that will endure beyond their own lifetime." In the research, Prof. Weiss and a co-author found that older people who thought about their generations reported better well-being.

Yet another solution: exercise. While the health benefits of physical activity are widely known, [a 2012 study](#) shows that exercise can also leave us feeling better about the aging process.

Researchers at the Berlin medical center Charité Campus Benjamin Franklin enrolled 247 women, ages 70 to 93, and randomly divided them into three groups. During three 90-minute sessions each week, one group attended a computer class, while another took an exercise program. The third group was told to stick to their normal routines.

After six months, the exercise group reported the highest level of satisfaction with aging, says Verena Klusmann, lead author and psychologist at the Universities of Konstanz and Bremen. (All three groups started at similar satisfaction levels.)

"These women were more physically fit, more alert and had better executive functioning. The positive experience of exercising affected their well-being and improved attitudes about aging," she says.