

# Financial Planning News

## Happiness and Older Adults

We are inundated with stories about Baby Boomers' financial prospects as they approach retirement. They have enough. They don't have enough. Social Security is broke. Social Security is the one of the greatest social insurance programs ever. Medicare, health care costs, caregiving to their own parents, longevity insurance, long term care planning, on and on and on.

Whatever the truth of the financial challenges that Boomers face, there is a growing body of research on aging which offers a surprising upbeat perspective on what is in store for all of us as we get older.

### **The Misery Myth**

“...and watched the smoke that rises from the pipes of lonely men in shirtsleeves leaning out of windows” - TS Eliot

There is a common, almost archetypal, image of lonely, depressed, discouraged older people. While there are lonely, depressed people in all age groups, I suspect we often view this affliction in older adults as being more common or somehow more sad. The reality, however, is that a growing body of data contradicts this stereotype and actually indicates that our older years may be our happiest.

Contrary to some common perceptions of depression in older adults, studies by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (a) and the National Institute of Mental Health (b) find that the 60+ age group actually has the lowest level of depression of any adult age grouping. Another CDC study in 2003 found significantly less overall psychological distress in people above 65 than in those between 45-65.(c)

A large study from Stonybrook University surveyed 340,000 people and found that overall stress drops consistently from our 20s into our 80s taking an especially sharp drop in our sixties (d). Anger decreased consistently from 20 to 80 while overall worry remained level from 20 to 50 but dropped dramatically in the 50s and 60s. The composite level of well being showed a U-shaped curve with the least well-being around 50 but rising dramatically in the 50s and 60s to levels significantly higher than from 20 to 50.

### **The Paradox of Aging**

The consistent message in these studies is that in our 60s and beyond people are consistently less stressed, worry less and have a higher sense of well-being than at any time in their adult lives. This is the case even in the face of the obvious challenges of older age such as loss of close relationships, deteriorating physical health, fear of death and other difficulties.

There is a further indication that emotional life becomes both richer and more balanced at the same time. Studies by psychologist Laura Carstensen, head of Stanford University's Center on Longevity and one of the nation's top researchers on aging, show that older adults have a less volatile emotional life even though it may be colored by richer and more varied experiences such as the bittersweet feelings (simultaneously happy and sad) of coming back to an old place or meeting a very old acquaintance.

### **It gets even better**

Furthermore, according to Carstensen's work, there appears to be an actual inclination toward positive emotions in older age. She calls it cognitive management in the service of mental well-being. Older adults seem to pay more attention to positive emotions and less attention to negative ones.

The reasons for these various characteristics are not clear. Carstensen suggests that rapidly shrinking remaining lifespan may paradoxically free us from the burden of planning for the future. There is less future to worry about so more reason to focus on the present and easier to enjoy what we have today.

It may also be chalked up to the wisdom of experience. Older people have had over 60 years to learn how to manage the varieties and intensities of emotions. They know that "this too may pass" and may be less likely to be "thrown for a loop" by their emotional life.

Whatever the explanations for these studies may be, they offer each of us a positive perspective that older age, while presenting obvious difficulties, also has real potential to be a distinctly rich, contented chapter of our lives.

You can read more about some of this research in the book [A Long Bright Future](#) which was recently published by Carstensen and describes much of her work in greater detail. In another issue of Financial Planning News I will discuss another exciting trend, the emergence of "Second Adulthood."

a -Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2007-2010, 10,000 people.

b - Under National Institute of Mental Health Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration annual survey of depression for 2008, part of National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HSDUH)

c – Center for Disease Control, 2003, presented by Laura Carstensen.

d – A Snapshot of the Age Distribution of psychological well-being in the United States", Stone et al, Stonybrook, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, June 1, 2010

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