

A LINE ON LIFE

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Does Aging Lead to Depression? *

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As people get older, do they get more depressed, less active and have less fun? According to psychologist Peter Lewinsohn, this does not seem to be true.

For over 12 years, Lewinsohn did the largest study of depression done in the United States, collecting data from almost 9,000 people ages 14-70 in Eugene, Oregon. Each subject was asked 200-400 questions in interviews that ranged from 2-4 hours. Even though the exact questions were changed to fit each age level, they measured the same concepts – depression, stress, social support, social interaction and engaging in pleasurable activities.

Lewinsohn's major finding was *"a decrease in depression in the oldest age range. Many of the assumptions we make about aging are really myths, at least according to the data."* Not only did older people report being less depressed; they also said they were as active and involved as younger people – and even less stressed! Looking back on their lives, these older people reported fewer episodes of depression during their life span than younger people. In contrast, depressed people at all ages are less active, less socially connected and under more stress than those who are not depressed.

Although stress is related to depression, this study found it negatively correlated to aging. (In other words, older people have *less* stress.) Lewinsohn believes that one explanation might be that *"a lot of stressful events are school- or job-related."* Additionally, although depressed people have less social support, *"older people may have more interactions with supportive types of people."*

Although older people reported being as active as younger people, the types of activities they choose are different. The oldest subjects seemed to be *"more careful about choosing activities they really enjoy doing."*

According to Lewinsohn, the *"most dramatic findings"* were related to physical health. Depressed people tend to have more health problems and have reduced appetites for both food and sex. In contrast, *"old people were not more likely to rate themselves as being in poor health."* In fact, they reported that their appetites for both food and sex were on a par with younger people. (By *"younger people,"* we don't mean teenagers or young adults.)

According to the subjects, even memory loss – one of the major fears of growing old – was not bothersome.

Lewinsohn broke his subjects down into ten-year age groups – those born between 1900-1910, 1910-1920 and so on. In these subgroups, the older people the were, the *"less likely they were at any given period to report depression."* According to Lewinsohn, this

difference "*was so huge, that at first we were dubious about the finding.*" However, this difference continued to show up as the study progressed. In fact, the tendency seemed to be progressive – the older his subjects were, the more likely they were to report that they had not been depressed when they were younger.

Other researchers have also found this age effect. Some of these researchers hypothesize that something may be "*making people more vulnerable to depression as they are born later and later in the century.*" This may be caused by more stress in our modern society. However, Lewinsohn doesn't think that this is the case.

Another hypothesis is the "*period effect.*" Knowing that our culture is continually changing, possibly people from certain eras were raised in ways that somehow immunized them more from depression. The strongest hunch for Lewinsohn is related to "*an interesting memory effect.*" The more removed an event is – not only is it less likely to be remembered – but its negative emotional aspects are more likely to be reduced. According to Lewinsohn, "*We all have a good-old-days, illusory kind of glow that becomes stronger as time elapses.*"

There is still another possibility not mentioned by Lewinsohn. Like people at any age, there is a great diversity among older people. Although there is a natural decline in abilities with aging — especially related to tasks that require speed – older people are still capable of living useful, productive and fulfilling lives.

For those who have lived unfulfilling lives in their youth, this is likely to be accentuated as they become older and realize that they can never reach many of their life goals. Others might feel depressed because their lives are restricted by reduced abilities and income. However, there is a large segment of older people who continue to live relatively comfortable, healthy, happy and fulfilling lives. Even though they are not able to continue certain activities, they find new activities and new goals that fit their interests and abilities. These oldsters are probably the ones that contributed to Lewinsohn's results.

If you are retired and want to find useful, interesting activities, there are many organizations – schools, nursing homes, hospitals, art galleries, historical sites, youth groups – which would love to have motivated volunteers. Why not call one of them now?

* Adapted from Tori De Angelis' article, "Study on aging paints rosy picture" in [*The APA Monitor*](#), August, 1990, page 11.