

Are Older Adults the Happiest Age Group?

Hundreds of published papers suggest that we experience peak happiness in our youth and old age, with a dip in mid-life around 50.

Index

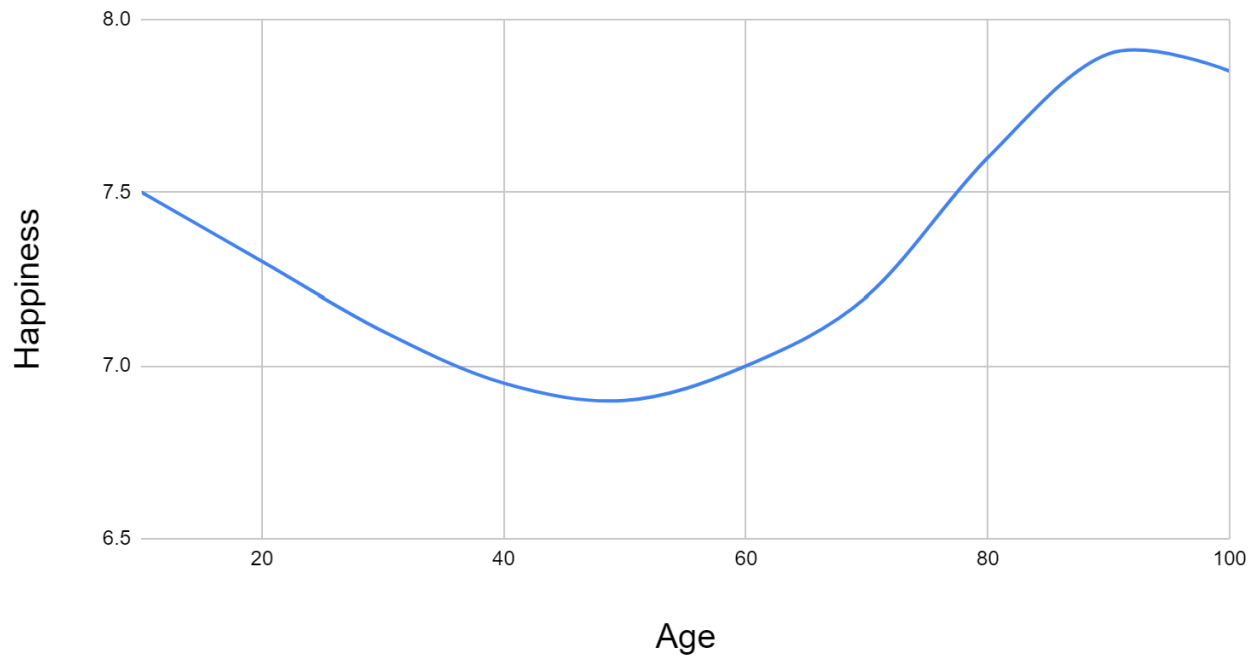
- [The U-Shaped Curve of Happiness.](#)
- [The Paradox of Aging.](#)
- [Theories on why older adults are happier.](#)
- [Are the young the least happy age group?](#)
- [Midlife crisis.](#)
- [Cultural differences in Happiness Age Rankings.](#)
- [Related Links and Videos.](#)

The U-Shaped Curve of Happiness

There are hundreds of published papers suggesting that happiness is U-shaped by age.

The research suggests that our peak happiness occurs in youth and old age, with a dip in mid-life around age 50.

U-Curve of Happiness



Example U-Curve of Happiness Chart

The U-shape pattern is evident in various well-being measures, such as life satisfaction, financial well-being, sense of worth, and happiness.

The Paradox of Aging

This perplexing phenomenon is known as the **paradox of aging**. From a mid-life perspective, aging can be daunting as you envision physical and mental decline.

But it turns out that midlife is usually the most stressful period in life, with work demands, caregiving stressors, and comparisons to peers and ideals.

Theories on why older adults are happier

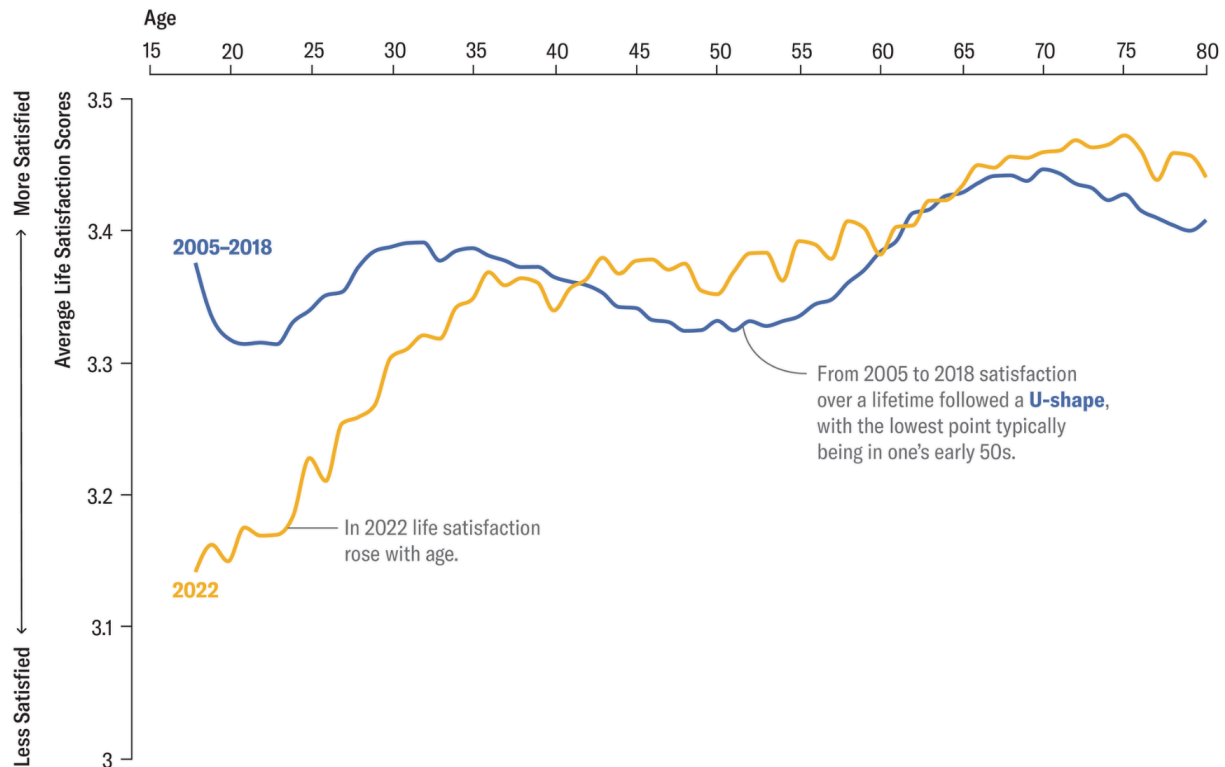
The U-curve of happiness is influenced by life experiences and the biological, cognitive, and emotional changes associated with aging.

Theories on why older adults are happier include:

1. Aware of their mortality, older adults focus more on regulating emotions to maximize positive feelings in their remaining time.
2. There is less emphasis on planning work and education and more on interpersonal relationships.
3. The "age-related positivity effect" is a tendency to focus on sources of happiness while downplaying negative information.
4. Increased comfort with ambiguity.
5. A narrowing of the social circle - engaging mainly in the most satisfying relationships.
6. Older people are on the whole more accepting of sadness than younger people.
7. Older people can view injustice with more compassion and less despair.
8. When we realize that we don't have all the time in the world, we see our priorities most clearly.

Are the young the least happy age group?

From 2021 to 2023, the younger age group is the least happy, a significant change from 2005 to 2018, when the younger age group was happier than those in the midlife groups and about as happy as those aged 60 and over.



Shuyao Xiao; Source: "The Global Loss of the U-Shaped Curve of Happiness," by David Blanchflower and Alex Bryson. Posted online June 6, 2024

CHART: The Decline in Youth Happiness Rankings

Midlife crisis

Is the decline in happiness rankings for 40 to 60-year-olds related to the phenomenon of the midlife crisis?

One common belief about this stage of life is that you should expect to face inner turmoil about your identity, life choices, and mortality.

Some cultures may be more sensitive to this phenomenon than others; one study found little evidence of midlife crises in Japanese and Indian cultures, raising the question of whether a mid-life crisis is mainly a cultural construct.

Cultural differences in happiness age rankings

Happiness Rankings differ a lot for the young and the old.

In some cases, these favor the old, as in the United States and Canada, where the rankings for those aged 60 and older are higher than those under 30.

In other cases, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the reverse is true, with many happiness rankings being higher for the young than for the old.

According to the 2024 World Happiness Report - Norway, Sweden, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain are countries where the old are now significantly happier than the young. At the same time, Portugal and Greece show the reverse pattern.

The experience of aging varies significantly across different cultures. The U-Curve of Happiness and the Midlife crisis are not universal.

With the latest research indicating a significant decline in youth happiness rankings in North America, the u-curve may now be more of a linear progression of increasing happiness as we age.

Sources:

Young Adulthood Is No Longer One of Life's Happiest Times

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/young-adulthood-is-no-longer-one-of-lifes-happiest-times/>

Happiness of the younger, the older, and those in between

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The Paradox of Aging: the Happiness U-Curve

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With Age Comes Happiness: Here's Why

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Midlife crisis

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