בס"ד

People 65 and older can get better with age

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People 65 and older can get better with age, a study shows. This is the key.

Researchers found that nearly half of adults over 65 did better on tests of cognitive and physical function as they aged.

By Maggie Penman

When Diana Nyad was 64 years old, she swam 110 miles from Cuba to Florida, becoming the first person to do so without a shark cage. It was her fifth attempt over the course of 3½ decades.

"I said when I did that swim, which was 12 years ago, that that was the prime of my life," Nyad said during a phone interview this month. She felt in better shape physically and mentally than she ever had before. "And honestly, at 76, I'm even better now than I was then."

Nyad is one of many examples of older people accomplishing things their younger selves could only dream of — but are these people anomalies? Or could many of us get faster, stronger, and sharper with age?

This question motivated a study published this month in the journal Geriatrics.

"I started thinking about these examples of people thriving in later life," said Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at the Yale School of Public Health and lead author of the new research. "How does that fit into this dominant belief that aging is a time of universal and inevitable decline? Are they exceptions, or are they actually kind of showing the potential of later life?"

Levy and a colleague, Martin Slade, looked at data from the Health and Retirement Study, which included several thousand participants who had been asked about their thoughts — positive or negative — about getting older. The researchers examined the participants' cognitive health and walking speed, which is generally considered a good indicator of physical fitness, and followed participants for up to 12 years to see whether their scores improved, and if there was a link to their views on aging.

Levy and her co-author found that nearly half of the participants over 65 improved — physically, cognitively, or both. And people with positive beliefs about aging were more likely to be in that group.

"Will you continue to age? Yes. Will you die? Without a doubt. But you can make it much better," said Louise Aronson, a leading geriatrician and professor emeritus of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. She said that while aging is inevitable, it's not a one-way street toward decline. "Maybe you don't lift as much weight as you did 40 years ago. But maybe you're lifting twice as much as you did one year ago because you understood that you can influence your

aging, and you had enough positivity to get yourself to do the strength training that is so transformative as we age."

Aging doesn't mean decline

Negative stereotypes about aging are pervasive. A global survey in 2024 found that 65 percent of health care workers and 80 percent of the general population falsely believed that developing dementia is a normal part of aging.

"The stereotype of an older person is that they're dependent, that they have cognitive impairment," said Mark Lachs, co-chief of the division of geriatrics and palliative medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine and New York-Presbyterian Hospital and professor of medicine at Cornell's medical school. While Lachs said that may sometimes be true, "the vast majority of older people don't have any cognitive impairment. The vast majority of older people do not need assistance."

Over the last couple of decades, there has been more research on the positive aspects of aging. Lachs noted that judgment and wisdom improve with age, as does emotional intelligence and even happiness. In Levy's new study, she and her co-author looked at data from thousands of people over 65 and saw that improvement with age wasn't the exception. It was almost as common as decline.

Part of the reason for the disconnect between the stereotypes and the reality, experts said, is that a lot of research on older people looks at average outcomes rather than individual outcomes, or looks only for decline or lack thereof, rather than the possibility of improvement.

Why attitude toward aging matters

Lachs said his patients are around 89 years old on average, and the people who are thriving usually have one thing in common: something in their life that gives them meaning and a sense of purpose.

"It could be politics, it could be a grandchild, it could be volunteering at the art museum, it could be animals, it could be traveling," Lachs said.

He believes that the reason attitudes toward aging matter so much is that they can set off either a positive or a negative cycle. If you feel good about yourself as you age and believe you can improve and be useful to the world, it feels worth it to invest the time and energy in working out, socializing, and volunteering. That might give you confidence and a mood lift, meaning you're more likely to do more positive things for yourself and others. There's evidence for that in Levy's research.

"If you have a positive aspect about aging, you might be more inclined to take care of yourself. Then you go out, you're more likely to have friends," Lachs said. "You have to walk to that dinner, so your mobility increases. You become engaged in that conversation, so all of these things are linked. And we know that one of the most powerful aspects of disease prevention and health and longevity is social connectedness." In the new research paper, Levy and her co-author describe this as a "snowball" effect.

Lachs said you can easily see how the opposite cycle could take hold: If you don't think that it's possible to improve your health as an older person, you're unlikely to bother with working out, making new friends, or trying new things.

"What's amazing about that is positivity about aging — it's not a drug; it's not a surgery. It's not like you have to get some toxic treatment. It's an attitudinal adjustment," Lachs said. "The mind-body connection, which, you know, when I was a medical student, was kind of woo-woo … it turns out that it's as powerful as many drugs we give and without any of the side effects."

The message, according to Slade, is "Don't give up," because, he added, "life can get better."

How to change your mind about aging

Part of what is so encouraging about this new study and their previous research, the researchers said, is that your mindset about aging isn't set in stone.

If you find that your own view of aging is more negative than you would like it to be, here's how to work on it:

Spend more time in intergenerational settings. One way to combat ageism is to expose younger people to older people — and vice versa. If young people have more older people in their lives, they see more older people who are thriving. There is a growing body of research about the benefits of intergenerational living and evidence that intergenerational teams perform better than same-age teams of any age.

There is an "opportunity to capitalize on the experience, wisdom and judgment of older people, and the creativity, risk-taking characteristics and new ideas of young people," said Paul Irving, senior adviser at the Milken Institute and distinguished scholar in residence at the University of Southern California's Davis School of Gerontology. "What an exciting new way to think about talent."

Try the ABC method. Levy developed an evidence-based technique to fight negative stereotypes about aging called the ABC method. The first step is increasing awareness of all the negative messaging we receive about aging — such as ads for antiaging serums or the representation (or lack thereof) of older people in television and film. "B" stands for shifting blame for challenges in later life to ageism as opposed to aging. And "C" is for challenging negative age beliefs — in yourself and in society at large.

Remember that there are pros and cons to every phase of life — and that aging is a privilege. "Ageism is the ultimate paradox because we all get older," Irving said. In American life now, there is a lot that divides us. "The one thing that we do share, if we're fortunate, is the opportunity for longer lives."