

# Research: How you think about your age may affect how you age

February 22 2010, by Amy Patterson Neubert

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The saying "You're only as old as you feel" really seems to resonate with older adults, according to research from Purdue University.

"How old you are matters, but beyond that it's your interpretation that has far-reaching implications for the process of aging," said Markus H. Schafer, a doctoral student in sociology and gerontology who led the study. "So, if you feel old beyond your own chronological years you are probably going to experience a lot of the downsides that we associate with aging.

"But if you are older and maintain a sense of being younger, then that gives you an edge in maintaining a lot of the abilities you prize."

Schafer and co-author Tetyana P. Shippee, a Purdue graduate who is a research associate at Purdue's Center on Aging and the Life Course, compared people's chronological age and their subjective age to determine which one has a greater influence on cognitive abilities during older adulthood. Nearly 500 people ages 55-74 were surveyed about aging in 1995 and 2005 as part of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States.

In 1995, when people were asked what age do you feel most of the time, the majority identified with being 12 years younger than they actually were.

"We found that these people who felt young for their age were more likely to have greater confidence about their cognitive abilities a decade later," Schafer said. "Yes, chronological age was important, but the subjective age had a stronger effect.

"What we are not sure about is what comes first. Does a person's wellness and [happiness](#) affect their cognitive abilities or does a person's cognitive ability contribute to their sense of [wellness](#). We are planning to address this in a future study."

Schafer also said that the current study's findings have both positive and negative implications.

"There is a tremendous emphasis on being youthful in our society and that can have a negative effect for people," Schafer said. "People want to feel younger, and so when they do inevitably [age](#) they can lose a lot of confidence in their cognitive abilities.

"But on the other hand, because there is such a desire in America to stay young, there may be benefits of trying to maintain a sense of youthfulness by keeping up with new trends and activities that feel invigorating. Learning new technologies is one way people can continue to improve their cognitive abilities. It will be interesting to see how, or if, these cultural norms shift as the Baby Boomer generation ages."

Other studies have shown that women are prone to aging stereotypes, so Schafer expected to see that women who felt older about themselves would have less confidence in their [cognitive abilities](#).

"There is a slight difference between men and women, but it's not as pronounced as we expected," Schafer said. "This was surprising because of the emphasis on physical attractiveness and youth that is often disproportionately placed on women."

Schafer also is studying how stressful events, such as family members' health issues, affect aging, as well as how happiness and aging relate.

These finding were published in January's *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, and the study was funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Provided by Purdue University

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