

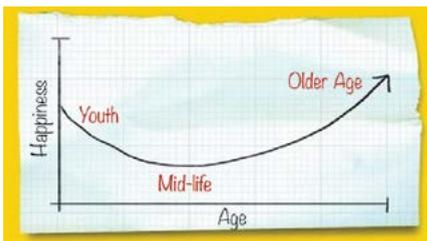
Letting Go of the “Misery Myth”

By Joyce Hanna, Stanford School of Medicine

Letting go of the Misery Myth may be the most important lifestyle choice we can make as we age.

The Misery Myth goes something like this: “Older people are miserable, sad, lonely, unhappy, dejected and depressed.” Don’t buy it! Study after study shows this stereotype of the miserable older person to be completely invalid.

Consider the U-shaped “Happiness Curve,” which depicts the relationship between happiness and age generalized over a lifetime. Happiness (or life satisfaction) follows a U-shape over the course of a lifetime with youth and old age reported as periods of relative happiness. This U-shape is the result of multiple studies in social science and medicine, done over 80 nations around the world and is adjusted for factors such as health and income. It turns out we reach the low point of that U in mid-life, not in older age, and that levels of happiness climb back up as we get older.



Embrace this truth: in general, older people are far happier than middle-aged people. We are more optimistic, with the lowest rate of depression of all age groups. What a paradox! A group who is losing their physical stamina, their youthful attractiveness, and their



opportunities for economic growth—how can older people be so content?

How can we explain this paradox of aging? For starters, we have a healthy life-perspective or “internal span clock.”

We see the importance of savoring the time that is left. We have a new way of evaluating what is worth our time, attention, worry or anger. We understand the fragility of life, the inevitability of changes and endings.

What’s more, we are more mentally stable and wiser with greater self-knowledge and higher self-esteem. We have integrated life’s experiences and deepened the relationships that nourish us.

80% of our health is determined by our lifestyle choices (The MacArthur Foundation) leaving us with a lot of choices to make every day on how we live our lives.

As we age, we work hard to make good choices around tobacco and

alcohol, what we eat, if we exercise, and how we manage our stress. We all know we need to sit less and move more; we need to eat less sugar and processed foods; we need to eat more fruits and vegetables.

But what about our choices around our belief system? Make a lifestyle choice to let go of the Misery Myth! It impedes change and growth and is based on a false stereotype of the miserable older person.

The truth is that happiness rebounds as we age. Let’s enjoy the ride together at the peak of the U!

To know how to grow old is the masterwork of wisdom and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living.

—Frederic Amiel

Joyce Hanna, MA, MS, is Associate Director of the Health Improvement Program in Stanford School of Medicine. Joyce has graduate degrees in education, exercise physiology and nutrition. She has worked as a behavioral health consultant, helping people make healthy lifestyle changes.

Joyce also gives classes on healthy aging, called, “Getting Older — Don’t Take it Sitting Down.” She focuses on the importance of exercise and nutrition but as she herself has gotten older, she puts more emphasis on the importance of attitude and acceptance of change.