Self-esteem declines sharply among older adults while middle-aged are most confident

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Self-esteem rises steadily as people age but starts declining around the time of retirement, according to a longitudinal study of men and women ranging in age from 25 to 104.

"Self-esteem is related to better health, less criminal behavior, lower levels of depression and, overall, greater success in life," said the study's lead author, Ulrich Orth, PhD. "Therefore, it's important to learn more about how the average person's self-esteem changes over time."

Self-esteem was lowest among young adults but increased throughout adulthood, peaking at age 60, before it started to decline. These results are reported in the latest issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, published by the American Psychological Association.

Four times between 1986 and 2002, researchers surveyed a total of 3,617 adults living in the United States. The researchers measured self-esteem by asking participants to rate their level of agreement with statements such as, "I take a positive attitude toward myself," which suggests high self-esteem; "At times I think I am no good at all" and "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure," which both suggest low self-esteem.

Subjects were also asked about their ethnicity, education, income, work status, relationship satisfaction, marital status, health, social support and if they had experienced stressful life events. Some examples of stressful life events are suddenly losing a job, being the victim of a violent crime,

or experiencing the death of a parent or of a child.

On average, women had lower self-esteem than did men throughout most of adulthood, but self-esteem levels converged as men and women reached their 80s and 90s. Blacks and whites had similar self-esteem levels throughout young adulthood and middle age. In old age, average self-esteem among blacks dropped much more sharply than self-esteem among whites. This was the result even after controlling for differences in income and health. Future research should further explore these ethnic differences, which might lead to better interventions aimed at improving self-esteem, wrote the study's authors.

Education, income, health and employment status all had some effect on the self-esteem trajectories, especially as people aged. "Specifically, we found that people who have higher incomes and better health in later life tend to maintain their self-esteem as they age," said Orth. "We cannot know for certain that more wealth and better health directly lead to higher self-esteem, but it does appear to be linked in some way. For example, it is possible that wealth and health are related to feeling more independent and better able to contribute to one's family and society, which in turn bolsters self-esteem."

People of all ages in satisfying and supportive relationships tend to have higher self-esteem, according to the findings. However, despite maintaining higher self-esteem throughout their lives, people in happy relationships experienced the same drop in self-esteem during old age as people in unhappy relationships. "Although they enter old age with higher self-esteem and continue to have higher self-esteem as they age, they decline in self-esteem to the same extent as people in unhappy relationships," said co-author Kali H. Trzesniewski, PhD, of the University of Western Ontario. "Thus, being in a happy relationship does not protect a person against the decline in self-esteem that typically occurs in old age."

There are numerous theories as to why self-esteem peaks in middle age and then drops after retirement, said the researchers. "Midlife is a time of highly stable work, family and romantic relationships. People increasingly occupy positions of power and status, which might promote feelings of self-esteem," said co-author Richard Robins, PhD, of the University of California, Davis. "In contrast, older adults may be experiencing a change in roles such as an empty nest, retirement and obsolete work skills in addition to declining health."

Orth doesn't think baby boomers will skew self-esteem trajectories as the majority of that generation reach retirement age. But with medical advances, they will be healthier longer and, therefore, may be able to work and earn money longer. "It is possible that the decline in self-esteem might occur later in life for baby boomers," he said.

More information: "Self-Esteem Development From Young Adulthood to Old Age: A Cohort-Sequential Longitudinal Study," Ulrich Orth, PhD, University of Basel, Kali H. Trzesniewski, PhD, University of Western Ontario and Richard W. Robins, PhD, University of California, Davis; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 98, No. 4.

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