The Mindset That Actually Predicts Whether You'll Get Stronger with Age

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BY JULIE STEWART

A Yale-led study of 11,000 adults found that mindset predicted who got stronger after 65.

When you hear stories about older adults who run marathons or earn doctoral degrees, you might assume these are *exceptions* to the general rule that getting older means slowing down, physically and mentally.

Now, new research challenges this assumption. In reality, you can get smarter and stronger with age — especially if you believe you can.

A study published in the journal ***Geriatrics*** found that about 45% of people over 65 improved their physical health, cognitive health, or both over an average of eight years. Highlighting the importance of perspective, it also determined that having more positive age beliefs predicted those improvements in both categories.

“What’s inspiring about this research is that it suggests that there is this alternative trajectory or pathway as we get older, and there’s a lot of diversity in these pathways,” said **Becca Levy**, PhD, Professor of Public Health (Social and Behavioral Sciences) and Psychology at Yale School of Public Health.

As Levy and her team wrote in the paper: “Our findings underscore the need to instill or magnify the positivity of age beliefs and to redefine aging so that it includes the **possibility of improvement**.”

What New Research Reveals About

Improving Health with Age

Over a period of up to 12 years, Levy's team studied a sample of more than 11,000 people in the Health and Retirement Study, a joint venture of the University of Michigan and the National Institute on Aging. They calculated the percentage of the sample who improved their physical health (as measured by walking speed) and cognitive health (assessed via a 27-point scale covering memory and math skills).

They also assessed participants' beliefs about age using a scale that measured their agreement with five statements, such as "The older I get, the more useless I feel."

As mentioned earlier, in addition to showing that over an average of eight years, 45% of people boosted their cognitive function, physical function, or both, they also determined that people with positive age beliefs were more likely than others to show improvements.

"We found that those who started this study who had already taken in more positive age beliefs had an advantage," Levy tells Super Age. "They were more likely to be in the improvement group, both for the cognitive health and the physical health improvement groups."

The results even surprised the researchers, who had predicted that about 11.5% of people would improve.

How Your Beliefs Lead to Healthier Aging

The results align with stereotype embodiment theory, a framework that Levy developed to understand how cultural beliefs about aging can affect our health over time. She notes that psychological, behavioral, and physiological pathways all play a

role.

“For example, if somebody’s taken in more positive age beliefs, they tend to have lower stress, and we know that if they have lower stress, it’s likely to lead to better health,” she says. People with a sunnier outlook on aging also tend to have fewer brain biomarkers associated with **Alzheimer’s disease**, such as plaques and tangles.

One explanation is that a sense of grounded optimism helps you face acute problems with more resilience. In an earlier **study**, Levy’s team found that positive aging beliefs **boosted brain health**, promoting recovery in those with mild cognitive impairment.

“With people who are recovering, we have found that positive age beliefs seem to act as a resource that they can draw on in providing positive images that could be inspiring and lead to more self-efficacy,” said Levy.

But the new research suggests an age-positive mindset does more than help you bounce back during a tough time. Positive aging beliefs also helped many people with normal cognition and physical function make gains.

Revamp Your Mindset For Longevity

To reduce negative age beliefs and strengthen their positive counterparts, start by increasing your awareness of how these stereotypes show up. “They’re so embedded in our society that it’s sometimes challenging to notice them,” Levy points out. “The first step is to make these invisible age beliefs visible.”

1) Name It to Tame It: One of the most effective methods is weekly age-belief journaling, she notes. Write down every example of an age belief that you encounter, whether it’s dialogue streaming on a television show or a conversation you overhear at the supermarket.

“Any example where somebody is talking about an older person, or an older person is portrayed, write that down and then also write down whether it’s a positive or a negative portrayal,” she said.

If it’s negative, consider: How could this person be shown more positively?

“If there’s this cranky janitor who’s presented on a show, an older character, could that character actually be presented as a resource for the high school students in some way?” offers Levy. “Is there another portrayal that could have been given to the older character?”

Log situations where older people are omitted from representation, too.

“If somebody watches a show and all the characters are under the age of 20 or even 30, could there have been an older character part of the storyline?” she says. “That’s one of the tools that we found effective to become more aware of age beliefs.”

Then, think about older people you admire — maybe they tell jokes well or dance beautifully in an adult ballet class — and diversify your portfolio of role models, Levy suggests.

2) Reframe Your Beliefs: Next, reframe how you think about aging’s challenges. Rather than blaming older people for their difficulties, consider ageism itself as the culprit.

The mental shift may not be hard to make, research suggests. One **study** published in *The Journals of Gerontology* found that people who simply read randomly assigned positive messages about aging displayed less implicit prejudice compared to those who read a control message unrelated to age. The interventions emphasized three key concepts: “the contributions of older adults to society; aging as a process of accumulating wisdom and energy; and mechanisms through which prejudice against

older adults operates.”

You don’t have to do it alone. A growing movement is reframing later life as a time marked by flourishing, not decline. **The National Center to Reframe Aging**, backed by the Gerontological Society of America, challenges ageist bias through research and advocacy, while **AGEIST** — our sibling platform, pioneered by Super Age founder David Stewart — builds community around the conviction that life after 50 is a period of expansion, not contraction.

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WRITTEN BY:



Julie Stewart