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LIFE & WORKHEALTH & WELLNESS

How Old Do You Feel? The Answer Can Reveal a Lot About Your Health, Scientists Say

Research is uncovering links between your ‘subjective age’ and your future health and longevity.

By *Betsy Morris* [Follow](#)

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Is it true that you’re only as old as you feel?

Studies are finding a link between people’s “subjective age” or “psychological age” and their future health and longevity. Psychological age can differ from chronological age, and some psychologists and gerontologists say there might be ways to improve physical health by making yourself feel younger—or at least taking a positive attitude toward aging.

Feeling older than your chronological age is associated with a higher likelihood of dementia, frailty, stroke and heart disease, according to recent research by scientists and academics studying links between psychology and health.

Some research focused on the correlation between attitudes and mortality have linked positive feelings about aging—and feeling younger than you actually are—with a longer life. In one German study of 2,400 adults over more than 20 years, participants who said they expected to continue to grow and develop into old age lived on average 13 years longer than those who didn’t expect such growth.

“It is really good and important to feel younger. It is soft protection. If I feel younger, I am more motivated to be engaged and active,” says Susanne Wurm, professor at University of Greifswald and an author of the study published earlier this year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Participating in new experiences, such as traveling or taking classes, and resisting negative assumptions about getting older might help you feel younger and improve your outlook, researchers say.

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being in good health is a big reason why many people might feel younger than they are—and therefore might live longer, according to scientists who study the psychology of aging. Many

of those researchers believe the effect can go the other way, too, noting that those with a younger and more optimistic sense of aging might be more apt to take care of themselves.

People who feel older might generate more stress, too, whether they are 30 and fretting about early signs of wrinkles or 65 and concerned that co-workers think they are losing their edge. Scientists searching for biological reasons for the link between subjective age and long-term health have, in recent studies of men over the age of 50, found that those who feel older than their actual age have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol and C reactive protein, an inflammatory marker associated with heart disease and other illnesses.

Our experiences can influence our feelings about aging. Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at the Yale School of Public Health, has conducted studies that found older people functioned differently after being exposed to either negative or positive words related to aging.

“Age beliefs are quite malleable. They are not set in stone,” says Dr. Levy.

She believes it is possible to shift your attitude about getting older. In her book “Breaking the Age Code,” Dr. Levy suggests writing down your beliefs about aging to make yourself aware of them and tracking ways in which older people are portrayed in the media to identify stereotypes that might be influencing you.

“Try to become aware of both our own beliefs and the ones we’re exposed to and don’t let them hurt you,” says Dr. Levy.

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Some scientists believe that biology, more than mind-set, might be the reason people feel older or younger than their calendar age. One study found physiological differences in the brains of people who said they felt older than their real ages and those who said they felt younger.

The study, by South Korean researchers at Seoul National University and Yonsei University, gave 68 healthy older adults assessments to evaluate their subjective age and scanned their brains. The participants whose subjective ages were older than their real ages had smaller amounts of brain gray matter than participants whose subjective ages were younger than their real ages.

Companies are beginning to market what they say are ways to measure and manage psychological age. Deep Longevity, a Cayman Islands-based biotech company, provides personalized mental-health tips based in part on an online psychological-age assessment and artificial intelligence—technology it hopes to be able to sell to employers as a wellness benefit. Modern Age, a New York-based health and wellness company, offers an online subjective-age assessment and sells beauty procedures and products such as Botox, creams and supplements.

Some scientists are skeptical of these efforts. Dayna Touron, associate dean and professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, says they could make people feel worse about aging. “Would you feel younger if you didn’t have wrinkles? Sure. But would that lead to better health outcomes as a result?”

Deep Longevity Chief Executive Deepankar Nayak says the company’s technology is designed to improve employee resilience and mental health. Anant Vinjamoori, chief medical officer at Modern Age, says the company’s products and services empower people and help them through the aging process.

To assess your subjective age, start by asking: How old do I feel? You can ask the question on any given day or in specific situations, such as when you are with younger people, Dr. Touron says. You can also ask how old you feel in different areas, such as your physical abilities, mental performance or social connections. There is no set formula, she says.

Being open to new experiences and challenges is one way to lower psychological age, Dr. Touron says. Take classes. Travel. Attend workshops. Spend time with friends who have positive attitudes about aging. Spend time with people younger than you by joining a hobby group or book club, she says. (It isn’t helpful to be in a group where you are cast in the role of wise elder, she says. While flattering, it can make you feel older.)

Don’t assume that common slip-ups are necessarily signs of cognitive failure, adds Dr. Touron. Repeated memory lapses that interfere with your daily life can warrant a call with your doctor. But plenty of younger people sometimes lose their keys or can’t find their cars in

your doctor. But plenty of younger people sometimes lose their keys or can't find their cars in the parking lot. If your friends or family attribute those mistakes to age, correct them, she and other scientists say.

“The beliefs you have about the inevitability of decline as you age can be self-fulfilling,” she says.

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