


THE LONG RUN

The logo for The Boston Globe, featuring the words "The Boston Globe" in a black, serif font.

Be careful what you think

It may come true. Stereotypes about aging can be bad for your health — or good.

By Kay Lazar, Globe Staff | March 15, 2010

When you think about aging, what words and images come to mind? Wrinkled, forgetful, maybe feeble?

You might want to rethink those, and try spry, wise, and distinguished, because our negative perceptions of our elders may have adverse effects on our own long-term health, according to a growing body of research.

Scientists are increasingly linking negative stereotypes about older adults to a number of health problems, from memory impairments to increased risk of heart disease and even a shortened life span. With elders often portrayed as the dentures, wrinkle cream, and incontinence segment of our youth-obsessed society, negative messages about aging can be pernicious and long-lasting, specialists say.

One recent study, by Yale University psychologist Becca Levy, tracked a group of 440 adults, from 1968 until 2007. It found that those who expressed gloomy views about elders when they were younger were much more likely to suffer a heart attack, stroke, or other cardiac problem 30 years later, compared to those who held more benign opinions. Specifically, 25 percent of those in the negative age-stereotype group had experienced a heart problem, compared to just 13 percent in the positive age-stereotype group, even taking into account variables such as blood pressure, smoking, and cholesterol levels.

The findings build on Levy's earlier work, which revealed that negative images of aging can increase stress, while positive ones can be calming. Other researchers have linked high stress levels to heart disease.

After scrutinizing stereotypes and their effects on health for the past 15 years, Levy believes that age-related stereotypes, more so than other types, get ingrained at an early age and then are not consciously reevaluated as we get older.

"If you look at gender stereotypes, for instance, girls who are exposed to stereotypes of females are more likely to question them because they are female," Levy said. "But age stereotypes are different because children are taking them in long before they think of themselves as aging."

When it comes to aging, Americans apparently harbor deep-seated and uncomfortable feelings.

Harvard social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji has long explored people's unconscious beliefs about a variety of sensitive subjects — from race, gender, and weight to religion and aging — and has found negative biases about aging to be among the strongest and most widely held. Roughly 80 percent of the thousands of people Banaji has studied over the past decade in a Web-based test have indicated an "automatic" preference for young people over older ones.

Banaji measures how people respond to images and words flashed so quickly on a computer screen that they don't have time to think through their answers and instead must give their subliminal, and researchers believe, truer feelings. What she found is that "even elderly people themselves show the [negative] age bias as strongly as young people do."

The idea that bad thoughts about aging can adversely affect health rings true for Dr. Thomas Perls, who has long studied people who live past 100 years old.

"Centenarians tend to be a very optimistic group, they tend not to dwell on things that were stressful, and they are able to let go," said Perls, founder and director of the New England Centenarian Study at Boston University School of Medicine.

Among the elders Perls is tracking is Sarah Bottrell, a 105-year-old retired high school teacher in Marquette, Mich.

A self-described optimist who has outlived all of her relatives, Bottrell said she doesn't dwell on the past, sings in her church choir, and has a "marvelous" circle of friends.

One other point — she doesn't "concentrate" on age.

"Ever since the '60s, when the country started acting crazy, that's when they started concentrating on people's age," Bottrell said. "In growing up, we never talked about ages. What difference does it make as long as you are doing OK? It doesn't make any difference whether you are 65 or 25."

The power of positive thinking when it comes to aging may have a parallel in the negative territory. Increasingly, researchers are finding that negative biases may become self-fulfilling prophecies.

North Carolina State University psychologist Tom Hess concluded in a 2009 study that elders who thought they should perform poorly on memory tests actually scored worse than seniors who did not believe negative stereotypes about aging and memory loss.

Hess gave adults ages 60 to 82 specific information that suggested an age bias, such as telling them that the researchers were trying to understand why younger and older adults perform differently on memory tests — and then asked each to write down his or her age. These elders did not do as well as those who were simply told that adults of various ages performed similarly on the test.

"If people buy into stereotypes of aging, they may stay away from tasks involving memory because they are concerned they may not be able to do well," Hess said. And that, he said, can feed on itself, perhaps affecting a person's future ability to recall information.

At the University of Kansas, researcher Mary Lee Hummert found in a 2006 study of baby boomers, ages 48 to 62, that those who thought of themselves as older tended to have poorer recall on memory tests than those who identified with younger people.

"We do internalize very early in life that youth is better than old age, and it doesn't leave us, even though it is modified," Hummert said. "And it does affect how we live our lives and make choices."

Those choices might help explain why some people, like Bottrell, the 105-year-old from Michigan, has lived so long.

Levy, the Yale researcher, has found that people older than 50 with more positive self-perceptions of aging, measured up to 23 years earlier, lived 7.5 years longer than those with less positive views. This advantage, documented in a 2002 study, held true, even after other factors were taken into account, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

"It would be nice, with baby boomers becoming older, that stereotypes would become more positive," Levy said, "but we haven't seen that yet."

Kay Lazar can be reached at klazar@globe.com. ■