

Stanford Center on Longevity  
**A LONGEVITY BRIEF**

# MAKING THE GLASSES ROSE-COLORED

What People of All Ages Can Learn  
from the Cognition of Older Adults

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## TAKE-HOME POINTS

- Contrary to popular belief, older people are happier and more satisfied with life than are younger people.
- Older adults tend to prioritize emotionally meaningful goals and are present-focused whereas younger people tend to prioritize knowledge and resource acquisition and are future-focused.
- Learning about age-related changes in priorities and perception of time can help people of all ages live happier and more productive lives.
- Prioritizing emotionally meaningful experiences, focusing on the present and choosing to interpret the world more positively can improve a person's overall experience of long life. This is especially true in an organizational context.

## THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

A common stereotype of aging is that becoming old is associated with loneliness and despair. However, it turns out everything does not go downhill as we age. Decades of research have made it clear that older people actually tend to be less lonely than younger people.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the happiest Americans are the oldest, with the odds of being happy increasing 5 percent with every 10 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

Why are older people happier than younger people? Psychologists posit

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that cognitive processes are responsible—specifically, the ability to focus and remember positive information and leave behind negative information. A prominent theory of how aging affects socioemotional functioning suggests that older people place greater importance on emotionally meaningful goals, whereas younger people place greater importance on goals related to knowledge acquisition or novel experiences.<sup>3</sup> Because emotion-related goals are prioritized, older people focus more on positive rather than negative features of their environment. For example, in one study, older and younger adults were presented with a series of ambiguous scenarios and then asked to continue the stories. Consistent with age-related positivity effects, older adults provided fewer negative endings to the scenarios than younger adults did.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have devoted particular attention to the brighter side of aging, which resulted in many studies that clearly demonstrate the general age-related shift toward positivity. Rather than looking at late life as a period of diminution and decline, people of all ages should learn from older people's ability to focus on the positives of life.



# PERCEPTION OF TIME BY YOUNG AND OLD

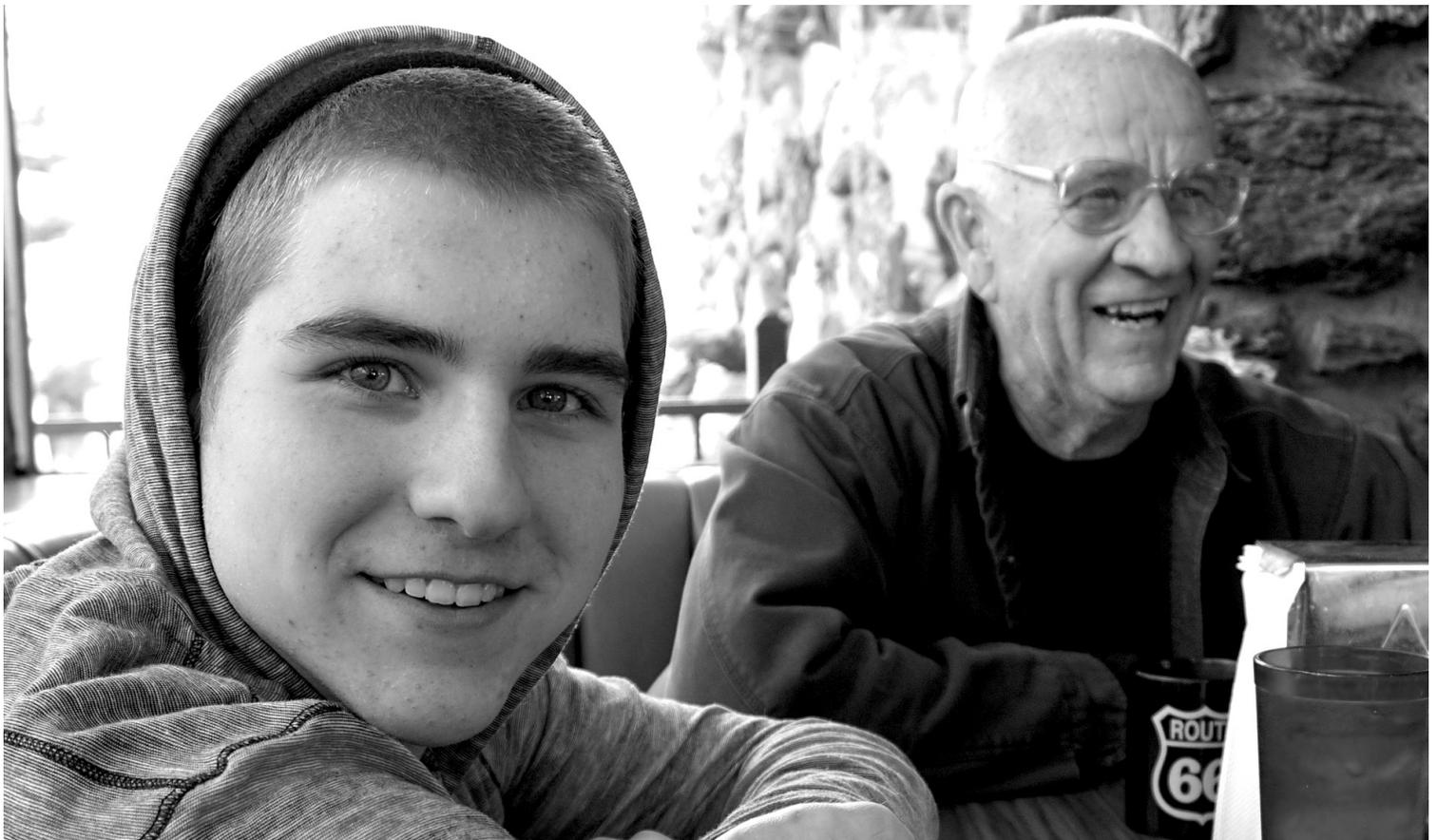
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Compared to their older counterparts, young people experience more disruptive events related to work, school, finances, legal matters, changes in living conditions and personal relationships. The checklist of critical tasks younger people may feel they need to accomplish—get an advanced degree, find a career and start a family—is so well established in our society that it can be very hard for people to even do those tasks in a different order or on a different time scale. Partially because of these societal expectations, adults age 18 to 33 experience the highest level of stress across all age groups.<sup>5</sup> Young people, more so than older people, are bombarded with messages to delay gratification—e.g., work hard now and reap the benefits

later. Consequently, trained and conditioned by society to focus on the future, young people feel that something has to happen first before they can feel happy. Indeed, young adults' journeys through life are so often told through tales of romanticized sacrifices: foregoing immediate positive emotional experiences in lieu of acquisition of knowledge and resources for the future.

Being future-oriented comes with both favorable and unfavorable consequences. On the favorable side, it allows for science and innovation; indeed, medical and technological advances are why humans can look forward to such long, healthy and happy lives. On the unfavorable side, how-

ever, reliance on this same predictive ability also means humans will experience negative emotions like anxiety. The reason for this is that although in general people are able to accurately predict specific future emotions, people are ineffective at predicting the intensity and duration of those future emotional reactions.<sup>6</sup> One reason for people's poor accuracy at predicting future emotions is that context exerts strong effects on future emotional reactions: The context in which people are making their predictions regarding future events is not the same context in which they will be having that experience. As a consequence, people's mental simulations regarding future events are almost always inaccurate.



# THE CASE FOR BUSINESSES

Over the next 40 years, the U.S. population is projected to grow by about 30 percent: from 309 million in 2010 to 400 million by 2050.<sup>7</sup> Most of the growth will be concentrated in the higher ages: The percentage of people over 65 is expected to increase from 13 percent in 2010 to 21 percent by 2050. Industries with large numbers of older workers, such as agriculture, real estate and educational services, face the risk of a significant number of employees leaving the workforce over the next few years as Baby Boomers reach the traditional retirement age.<sup>8</sup> In general, although there has been an increase of labor force participation among the over-65 set, older workers are still facing negative stereotypes; in the work context, older adults are perceived as more likely than their younger counterparts to have health problems that affect their work. However, of the non-working population age 55 to 74 years in 2008, approximately 62 percent, or 16 million, were healthy enough to work.<sup>9</sup>

An ever-growing body of research shows the benefits of intergenerational contact in teams. For example, one study found that members of age-diverse teams are less likely to quit their jobs than are members of age-segregated teams.<sup>10</sup> Collaboration across generations is an effective way to utilize the best of both cognitive worlds: future-oriented younger workers and present-oriented older workers.<sup>11</sup> Understanding older people's priorities and motivations is vital for recruiting and retaining older workers. Indeed, businesses that recognize this potential source of labor and develop strategies to retain older workers while training and engaging



younger workers may have a competitive advantage as the population shifts toward older ages.<sup>8</sup>

Employers have an opportunity to better engage younger workers and retain older workers by focusing on motivation. When motivated and engaged, employees are more connected to their work roles physically, emotionally and cognitively.<sup>12</sup> Full-time workers spend more time working than doing anything else: On an average day in 2015, employed Americans spent about 8.8 hours working, 7.8 hours sleeping and just 1.2 hours caring for others, including children.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, workplaces must nurture workers as people in addition to nurturing them in their role as employees. There is both great opportunity and responsibility to ensure that workplaces fully represent the drives and hopes of workers of all ages.

One particularly effective intervention

already used in many workplace wellness programs is mindfulness training. Research shows that practicing mindfulness is good for both individuals and teams: It increases well-being and productivity while decreasing absenteeism, turnover and implicit bias, therefore leading to more effective collaboration.<sup>14, 15</sup> Encouraging mindfulness helps people appreciate their present conditions; this is something that older workers already tend to do at a higher rate than younger workers.<sup>16</sup> Encouraging employees to slow down and focus on the present may seem contrary to the standard corporate culture of speed and goal attainment. Yet it not only has the ability to improve the retention of older workers and promote intergenerational collaboration, it can also help teach employees of all ages to focus on the present, which leads to happier and more productive workers.

# UNDERSTANDING OLDER ADULTS' COGNITION

In sum, the body of research about social and emotional aging suggests that older people are more present-oriented and focus more on positive rather than negative information, compared to younger people. Younger people can and should take advantage of what we know about social and emotional aging because tending to feelings and emotions and becoming more aware that time is truly limited can emphasize and enhance positive experiences.

Optimistic workers generally experience more positive outcomes.

Our motivations, beliefs, values and goals cause us to view and interpret the world through colored glasses. Especially for young people, those lenses might create a negative shadow on their interpretation of the world. However, people of all ages can become aware of the glasses, and choose which type of lenses they want to use to interpret the world. Choosing rose-colored lenses will enhance and prolong positive experiences, which can improve people's emotional well-being and overall experience of long life. In an organizational context, when pessimistic workers run into an obstacle, they are more likely to give up—after all, pessimistic workers nev-

As long as we are viewing the world through interpretive lenses, why not make them rose-colored?

er expected to succeed in the first place. Optimistic workers, however, when faced with obstacles, try harder; they find alternative courses of action that help them overcome the obstacles. Consequently, because optimistic workers expect things to turn out well, they generally experience more positive outcomes. As long as we are viewing the world through interpretive lenses, why not make them rose-colored?





# ACTION STEPS

1. Spend more time engaging in present-focused activities such as cooking, exercising and conversing with a friend or colleague. One way to encourage this in organizations is to create employee wellness programs that include mindfulness training. Mindfulness at work decreases absenteeism, turnover and bias while increasing productivity.<sup>14</sup>
2. Build environments that allow people to be of service to others. Volunteering and helping others enhances feelings of meaning and belonging, which in turn increases well-being.
3. Create a culture of positivity. Ask questions such as, If I were being positive, how would I perceive this situation? What can I do to solve the problem? Avoid negative thought patterns that involve thinking of one catastrophe after another.
4. Time is ticking. Understanding that certain moments are short-lived encourages people to enjoy them while they're happening.

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The mission of the Stanford Center on Longevity is to redesign long life. The Center studies the nature and development of the human life span, looking for innovative ways to use science and technology to solve the problems of people over 50 in order to improve the well-being of people of all ages.

