

Positive thinking makes for happy old people

[July 14, 2011](#) | By Shari Roan, Los Angeles Times / For the Booster Shots blog

Older people are, well, old. They are in declining health, confronting death and may already be losing some of the people closest to them. So why do many seniors seem so happy?

Research shows that the golden years are often the happiest. The work by Dr. Laura Carstensen at **Stanford**, author of the book "A Long Bright Future," lays out a lot of the evidence for that theory. Now a new study shows how this phenomenon takes place in the brain.

Researchers in Germany used functional MRI brain scans to examine 22 young people (average age of 25) and 26 older volunteers (average age of 65). Their brains were scanned while they performed a cognitive task that included totally irrelevant pictures of faces that were happy, sad, fearful or neutral.

The study, published Thursday in the journal **Biological Psychiatry**, found that the elderly participants were more distracted by the happy faces. This showed up in the brain with a strong signal in an area that controls emotions. The people with the strongest brain signal were those who were ranked on a psychological assessment as having the greatest emotional stability. In other words, the brain seems to prefer to engage in positive information later in life. But that preference for positive experiences appears to rely on sufficient cognitive resources. The findings may help explain the problems with regulating emotions that are sometimes seen in older people with dementia or cognitive impairment. Theories on one's emotional outlook during aging are beginning to coalesce. The research suggests that older people prefer to be happy and focus on short-term rather than long-

term goals as they age. They also develop increased emotional control that enhances their happiness levels.

"The lessons of healthy aging seem to be similar to those of resilience, throughout life," the editor of Biological Psychiatry, Dr. John H. Krystal, said in a news release. "... when coping with extremely stressful life challenges, it is critical to realistically appraise the situation but also to approach it with a positive attitude."

Copyright © 2011, Los Angeles Times