Happy makes healthy, study finds

By ERIN ANDERSSEN
Monday, September 13, 2004 - Page A1

OTTAWA -- In August, with his 78th birthday looming, Baxter Howse built a house and thought nothing of it.

He hammered roof shingles, strapped ceilings and lugged patio stones for a three-bedroom bungalow in St. John’s as part of a Habitat for Humanity project. In fact, he had to stop for a minute when asked how his senior status compared to his co-workers on the site; it just wasn’t something that crossed his mind. Most days, he forgets how old he is.

“I guess there are some that sit around, but I think that’s an awful life,” he said in a telephone interview. “I wake up every morning and I am busy.”

Baxter Howse is a happy guy, and that just may be the secret of his high energy level. A new study to be published today has found that happy, satisfied people have a significantly better chance of staying stronger and more mobile than their cranky peers.

The study tracked, over a period of seven years, a group of more than 1,500 seniors who were all in good health. Researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch assessed their happiness and life satisfaction from the beginning of the study and monitored their rate of decline by testing areas such as walking speed and grip strength.

Adjusting for variables, they discovered that the grumpy participants were more likely to become frail as time went on, adding to growing evidence of the influence of attitude on physical health.

An earlier study that tracked older Americans over six years has linked being positive to a major reduction in the incidence of strokes. Other research found that hip-replacement patients buoyed by optimism and life satisfaction were as much as nine times more likely than depressed patients to regain their pre-surgery levels of mobility.

The link between good mood and brain power was also the focus of a second study to be published today in the Journal of Psychology and Aging that suggests that negative stereotypes, even subtle ones, may have a direct impact on how well aging brains perform.

In the study, about 200 adults, both young and old, were asked to complete a memory test after sitting in front of a television screen that subliminally flashed negative and positive phrases at them — words such as “confused” and “feeble” or “accomplished” and “dignified.” In the experiment, the
seniors who watched the negative wording performed much more poorly on the test than seniors
who received the positive wording. The latter group, in fact, scored almost the same as the young
control group.

The conclusion, says Thomas Hess, a researcher at North Carolina State University who
co-authored the study, is that if society sends the message that seniors are confused and fragile,
the older generation appears more likely to meet that expectation.

Dr. Hess suggests the finding even has an impact on cognitive studies on aging, since participants
may go into experiments assuming that researchers expect lower results. The study fits into other
research that suggests that negative stereotypes, beyond having an emotional impact, can influence
performance.

"Situations may result in older adults performing below what their true ability is," Dr. Hess said.
"There are other things besides decaying biological systems that can have a rather dramatic effect
on older adults' memories."

Victoria resident Tom Mayne, who will turn 86 in December, has watched that physical and mental
"decay," as he calls it, in several of his friends who fell into the stereotype of the listless
couch-potato senior. "Those people have long since gone because of their attitude," he said.

Mr. Mayne, on the other hand, spends his days greeting tourists as one of Victoria's town criers,
when he's not volunteering at his church or travelling North America collecting old children's books.

"I've got a few aches and pains," the retired teacher said in a telephone interview.

"But I don't get down in the dumps. Basically, I've always looked ahead and said the next day can't
be worse."

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