Aging adults optimistic about what lies ahead

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(Photo: Jack Gruber, USA TODAY)

They're either optimistic or delusional, but 89% of older adults and 84% of younger adults say they're confident they can maintain a high quality of life throughout their senior years.

The reasons vary, but support of friends and family is at the top, followed by being happy about their living situation, being well-prepared financially, being in good health and generally being optimistic, according to a phone survey of more than 2,000 adults, half of whom are 60 and older and the other half ages 18-59. The survey conducted in March is part of a joint effort by the National Council on Aging, National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, UnitedHealthcare and USA TODAY.

Still, the overall survey offers cautionary tales about aging in our rapidly changing society.
"We had this little fantasy — Social Security and your pension were going to save the day and now we know it's not," says Toni Antonucci, a psychologist at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and a member of the MacArthur Research Network on Aging.

On the financial front, 45% of the older group surveyed said they wished they had saved more money; almost one-third (31%) said they wished they had made better investments.

Those worries have been echoed by others. Consider an online survey of more than 4,000 workers in April from the non-profit Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies. Among the responses from 1,805 Baby Boomers, 47% had seen declines in investments including retirement funds; 41% expected their standard of living to decrease when they retire; and 42% said they'd seen drops in the value of their homes.


"Some people never have enough and some people think they never have enough, even though they may," he says.

The new survey finds more financial optimism than last year, but still almost half (49%) of the 60-and-older respondents say they're concerned that their savings and income will be sufficient to last the rest of their lives. In 2013, 53% expressed that concern.
Holly and Howie Stein play cards with granddaughters Talia Bradey, 8, left, and Elise Bradley, 6. (Photo: Jack Gruber, USA TODAY)

Holly Stein, 66, of Silver Spring, Md., says she and her husband of 44 years, Howard Stein, 67, are both career educators who were cautious about their spending. Neither participated in the survey.

"I always used to think, working in education we probably would never have earned enough money to be able to comfortably retire," she says. "But to my surprise, we did a good job of it."

Geriatrician Tom Perls, a professor at Boston University School of Medicine, says the overall confidence expressed by the 60-plus survey group bodes well for their longevity.

Although he wasn't involved in the survey, Perls, founder and director of the New England Centenarian Study (the largest such survey in the world that is now in its 20th year), says those who live to 100 aren't worry-free. Up to 40% have age-related illnesses. But, he says, "they have developed a means of coping with their illnesses in such a way they still live independently and maintain a relatively high quality of life."

USA TODAY partnered with the National Council on Aging, United Healthcare and the National Association for Area Agencies on Aging to take the pulse of Americans 60 and older on their health, quality of life, financial situation and whether their communities are prepared to serve an aging population. The United States of Aging survey included interviews with 1,000 Americans 60 and older, plus a comparison group of 1,027 ages 18-59, between April 3-May 6, 2014. (Photo: Janet Loehrke)
"We've also found (that) people who achieve these older ages have personality characteristics that make them an optimistic group," he says.

Additionally, because Baby Boomers are driving growth in the aging population, Perls says this group has a lot going for it.

"They're better-educated. They're more well-off financially than any group the country has ever encountered. They have better access to health care, better health-related choices, better diet and more exercise," he says. "Baby Boomers are going to be a major force for the future in terms of how well the population is aging. The survey's results are not surprising to me."

Dennis Domer, of Baldwin City, Kansas, officially stopped working June 30 as project director at a University of Kansas program in Lawrence, but he isn't retiring.

"I'm in very good health," he says. "At 70, I take no medicine at all. I walk a lot and exercise a lot. I don't even talk about retirement because I call it moving on to the next project. Now, I'm moving on and beginning some consulting."

Domer, a professor, was not among those surveyed. He says not having to go into the office will give him more time with his six grandchildren — and their parents.

There's an annual fishing trip next month, and he's already planning next summer's visit to Germany with two grandchildren. He has taken two and the others will be next. Staying close to family is important, he says.

"We're always thinking about it — how can we get together by phone or Skyping or FaceTime," he says. "All these technologies are helping us stay closer."

Although travel is on the minds of many older adults, 77% of the survey respondents say they plan to stay in their current home the rest of their lives, 17% don't, and 5% don't know.

Among those staying put, reasons are varied:
• 78% -- My home meets my needs;
• 75% -- I want to be able to live independently;
• 71% -- My home is located in a good neighborhood;
• 62% -- I want to stay close to friends or family;
• 62% -- I've invested financially in my home;
• 47% -- I have a lot of memories in my home.

For those staying in their homes, 28% plan modifications for aging. For the 68% who aren't making changes, the majority say it's because their home is already suited to aging needs.
"We live in a house that is going to be senior-friendly because it is one story," says Marsha Adler, 71, of Mountain View, Calif. "We're doing some renovation to make sure that the openings in some places are wider in case we at some point need a wheelchair."

But for now, she and her husband (neither participated in the survey) are "in very good health and we've also exercised and had a good diet and neither of us has any chronic diseases."

On the health front, the survey found few age group differences. To the question "Who is the most influential person in your life encouraging you to stay healthy or get healthier?" the response "myself" is at the top, cited by 39% of older adults and 43% of younger ones. Additionally, 26% of older respondents and 20% of younger ones said "my spouse." Another 15% of the older group and 16% among the younger group said "a child."

The value of keeping fit is borne out in two studies published in May. Of 1,635 sedentary individuals ages 70-89 analyzed in a University of Florida study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, moderate physical activity helped maintain their ability to walk at a rate 18% higher than those who didn't exercise. Another study, published in the online journal PLOS ONE, found that older adults (average age 78) who get at least 25 minutes of moderate or vigorous exercise daily need fewer prescriptions and are less likely to be hospitalized in an emergency.

Howard Stein says he and Holly have always tried to eat healthfully, and since retirement both have been exercising more.

"As I'm aging, I have to do more," he says. "I want to be able to keep up my physical strength. When we travel, I want to be able to pick up the 50 pounds for the suitcase."