

# The Silver Lining of the Golden Years

*You're wiser, smarter, and happier than you were 20 years ago. Here's how to keep your youthful spirit in sync with the grown-up you are today* ■ BY WINNIE YU ■ PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANN E. CUTTING



STYLING BY BRANDON KLEIN

TIME WAS, you backpacked through Europe, partied every weekend, and tried something new whenever you ate out. These days, you rent the same beach house every summer and always order “the usual” at your favorite restaurant.

“Around age 50, most people become less curious and more introverted, but they also become more agreeable and conscientious,” says Paul T. Costa Jr., PhD, chief of the Laboratory of Personality and Cognition at the National Institute on Aging. Translation: You really *are* more likely to stick to your routine these days, but such age-related changes are not only normal and healthy, they can also provide many benefits. Here's what age does to your attitude—and how to make your personal evolution work for you.

### YOU CARE MORE ABOUT DOING THE RIGHT THING

■ **The Upside:** People who exhibit this personality trait—known as conscientiousness—live up to 2 years longer than their peers, finds a recent study in *Healthy Psychology*. “Conscientious types tend to avoid smoking or drinking too much,” says study author Leslie Martin, PhD, chairman of the psychology department at La Sierra University. “They’re also more prepared and competent and, as a result, they’re generally less stressed.”

A dutiful attitude may even help shield you from Alzheimer’s disease—recent research from Rush University Medical Center in Chicago found that conscientious people were 89% less likely to develop the disease. Your brain gets a workout when you organize and plan, which may help buffer it from the disorder, says study leader Robert Wilson, PhD.

■ **The Downside:** You may get upset if things don’t go according to plan, Martin says. And since being conscientious goes hand in hand with



an agreeable mindset, says Costa, you might also be less likely to question authority—even when you should. For example, you may continue to take a drug because your doctor prescribed it, even if your symptoms don’t improve.

■ **Strike a Balance:** Hang on to a routine that works, but be flexible with the unexpected, such as when an out-of-town visitor shows up on your doorstep. Remind yourself that what your doctor says isn’t necessarily gospel; do your own research and get a second opinion.

### YOU’RE NO LONGER A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY

■ **The Upside:** “The relationships you have become deeper and more meaningful,” says psychologist Laura Carstensen, PhD, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. “You’re less interested in breadth and more interested in depth.”

■ **The Downside:** Even the closest friends can move away or get sick, and you may become less interested in pursuing new ones, leaving you without a rich social network. But community is crucial for

practical and emotional support and can prevent the feelings of isolation that may boost your risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

■ **Strike a Balance:** Having fewer friends is fine, so long as you’re satisfied with the quality of your relationships, Wilson says. But if you feel lonesome, consider putting yourself in a situation where you’ll automatically meet and interact with new people, possibly by doing volunteer work or signing up for a class.

### YOU’RE LESS LIKELY TO SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

■ **The Upside:** Over time, experts say, most people get less neurotic (a Woody Allenish trait marked by anxiety and difficulty coping with stress). And that lowers your risk of depression and even dying prematurely: Researchers at Rush University Medical Center found that less neurotic adults had about half the risk of death over a 5-year period as more distressed peers. Worrying may boost levels of cortisol—and excess levels of that stress hormone raise your risk of heart

disease, says Daniel Mroczek, PhD, a professor of developmental studies at Purdue University.

Keeping a level head may also help you remember where you put your keys. In 2007, researchers at Rush University reported that less anxious folks had 40% lower odds of memory problems.

■ **The Downside:** You may be *too* laid-back about your health. Surprisingly, a little anxiety might up your odds of finding relief if you’re ill. A study in *Aging & Mental Health* revealed that among depressed elderly people, those who were neurotic were also more apt to try different treatment strategies until they found a successful approach.

■ **Strike a Balance:** Keep up with doctor’s appointments—and enjoy your newfound calm. “Having as little neuroticism as possible means more emotional stability and less stress,” Wilson says.

### YOU PREFER THE TRIED AND TRUE

■ **The Upside:** Researchers say that over time, people tend to stick with experiences they know they’ll

enjoy. As adventurousness falls off, so does recklessness. You’re less likely to plunk your life savings into a risky new stock and more inclined to invest in a proven mutual fund. And seeking out what you know and like helps ensure satisfaction with your choices. “That’s key to happiness and mental well-being,” Costa adds.

■ **The Downside:** A 2007 Duke University study found that those who were more curious lived longer than their peers. Redford Williams, MD, director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke, says it’s possible that adventurous people are more resilient and less fretful in the face of a new development—even when it’s a life-threatening illness.

■ **Strike a Balance:** Try something new often, whether it’s cooking an ethnic dish or visiting an art gallery in the next town, Costa says. You may find a new passion and a bit of the daring young woman you once were. Except this time around, you won’t wake up the next day with a hangover. □