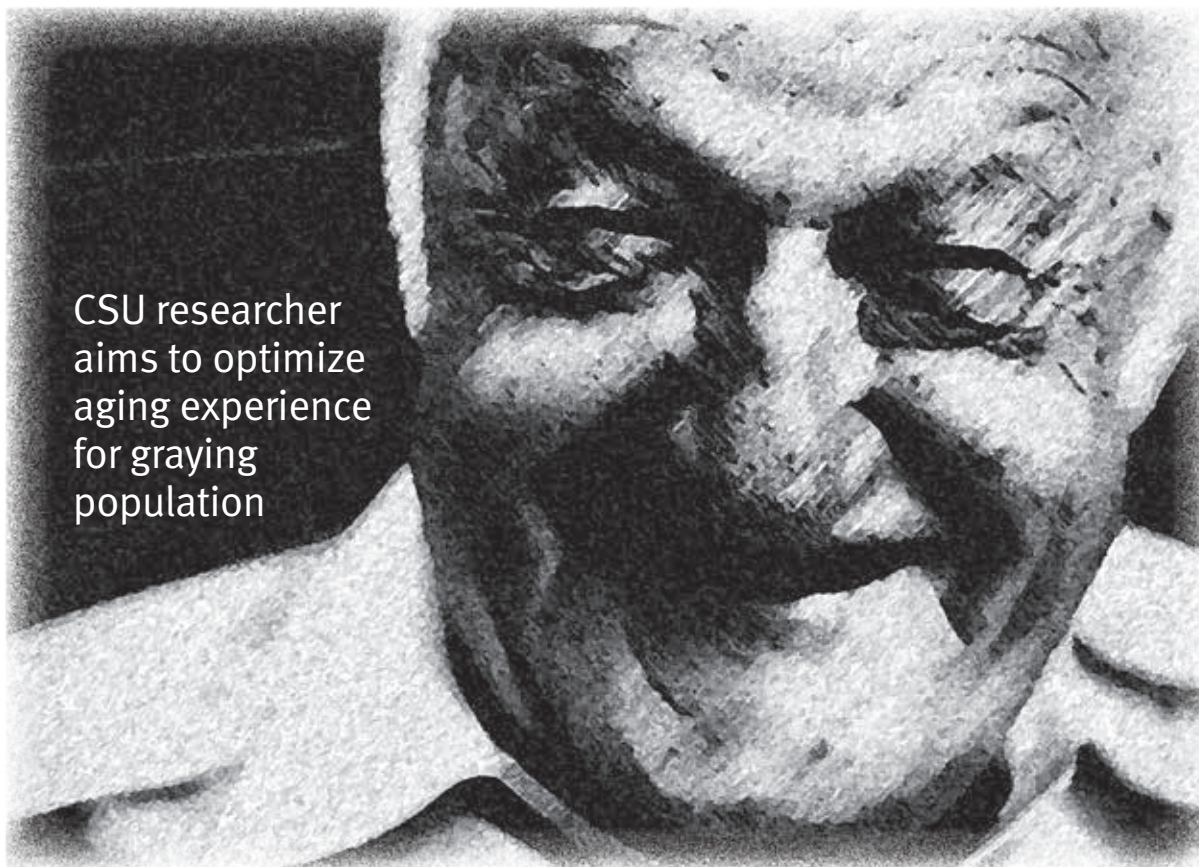


# As Old As You Feel



CSU researcher aims to optimize aging experience for graying population

How does a person know when he or she is old? The answer is more complicated than one might think. A Colorado State University (CSU) researcher is working to unravel the complicated interaction between how young or old a person feels — self-perceived age — and his or her actual age, and the impacts of both on health, well-being and quality of life as we age.

In a project funded by the National Institutes of Health, CSU is developing a measurement of self-perceived age that could lead eventually to an educational intervention to counteract negative perceptions about growing older.

## Attitude is important

Understanding attitudes about age and aging among the globe's graying population — and creating positive attitudes on the subject — could save healthcare dollars by keeping people healthy longer. A large part of maintaining health while growing older lies in the power of positive thinking.

“What is it that goes into the simple answer to the question of how old or how young someone feels?” says Manfred Diehl, a human development and family studies

researcher at CSU and the principal investigator on the grant. He explains that a reliable, comprehensive awareness of aging measurement has not been developed before.

“Aging is unavoidable. We all get wrinkles, gray hair, our physical condition and stamina change,” he says. “These are normal age-related

changes. But how do people perceive these changes? And what do they do with it? Research shows that when people feel younger than they actually are, it predicts that they'll live longer and with fewer problems than people who feel older.”

In fact, one study showed that a positive attitude about aging could increase a person's lifespan by a substantial seven and a half years. Diehl points out that some aspects of life, such as a person's ability to

deal with conflict or the value he or she places on relationships, can improve with age, but people may fail to notice these positives because of their generally negative perceptions about aging. Taking note of positive

changes that can come with getting older and optimizing them can make a significant difference in a person's health, well-being and length of life.

“If our research can help people become more aware of their own aging and take action to optimize it through preventive health behaviors, such as exercising, health screenings, planning for retirement and long-term care, then we can make aging an experience that more people enjoy and embrace. Every year that someone is out of a nursing home and healthy can add up, collectively, to millions of dollars in healthcare savings and to better quality of life for more individuals,” Diehl says.

## The study

Diehl and his research partners — Alyssa Gibbons from the Department of Psychology at CSU and Hans-Werner Wahl from the University of Heidelberg, Germany — will measure people's awareness of age-related changes based on five behaviors and whether or not these behaviors have improved or declined. Their initial survey of nearly 200 questions will eventually be refined to 20-30 questions and provide an accurate measurement of adults' views of their own aging.

Ultimately, the goal is that a short form of the questionnaire can be used by doctors, hospitals, or as an online self-administered survey to

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## Top 10 tips to promote successful aging

### 1. Stay physically active:

Exercise daily. Avoid impairment and disability due to becoming physically inactive. If you don't use it, you will lose it.

**2. Stay mentally active:** Learn something new every day. Exercise your mind with daily “brain jogging,” such as reading books, newspapers and magazines. Again: Use it or lose it.

**3. Stay connected to other people:** Treasure and nurture the relationships you have with your spouse/partner, your family, friends and neighbors. Reach out to others, including younger people. Stay involved in your community.

**4. Don't sweat the small stuff:** Don't worry too much. Be

flexible and go with the flow. Don't lose sight of what really matters in life.

**5. Set yourself goals and take control:** It is important to have meaningful goals in life and to take control in achieving them. Being in control of things gives us a sense of mastery and usually leads to positive accomplishments.

**6. Create positive feelings for yourself:** Experiencing positive feelings is good for our body, our mental health and for how we relate to the world around us. Feeling good about our own age is part of this.

**7. Minimize life stress:** Many illnesses are related to life stress, especially chronic stress. Stress

identify areas where an aging person may need positive interventions. Such interventions can take on different forms, such as educational online articles and aging tips, and would be designed to help people change their attitude and optimize their health and well-being. Diehl hopes to change people's negative attitudes about aging into positive attitudes with new opportunities for education.

The new questionnaire assessed these five behaviors.

- Health and physical function: basic overall health.

- Cognitive function: memory, problem solving and reasoning.

- Interpersonal relations: relationships with family and friends, and the activities within those relationships.

- Social-emotional function and how feelings are regulated: Has aging led to more patience, or has the person become more short-tempered? Is he or she better at dealing with conflict?

- Lifestyle and engagement: Is the person investing time and energy into what he or she values, or has life become more restricted?

Also involved in the study is Allyson Brothers, a CSU doctoral student in the Applied Developmental Science program in Human Development and Family Studies. The department is a part of the College of Applied Human Sciences.

Men and women who are 40 years old or older in the Northern Colorado area who would like to participate in the study can contact Diehl at [manfred.diehl@colostate.edu](mailto:manfred.diehl@colostate.edu) or by phone at 970-491-1767.



**Editor's Note:** This article was provided as a news release by Colorado State University.

has a tendency to “get under our skin,” whether we notice it or not. Try to minimize stress and learn to unwind and “smell the roses.”

#### **8. Adopt healthy habits:**

Maintain optimal body weight. Eat healthy food in small portions. Drink alcohol in moderation. Quit smoking. Floss your teeth. Adopt good sleeping habits.

#### **9. Have regular medical**

**checkups:** Take advantage of health screenings and engage in preventive health behavior. Many symptoms and illnesses can be successfully managed if you take charge and if you partner with your healthcare providers.

#### **10. It is never too late to start working on Tips 1 through 9:**

Change is possible at any age.

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