

The longevity revolution is well underway, and everything we've thought about aging is up for grabs as we live and work longer than any other generation in human history. Many great minds are committed to redefining aging and retirement models that embrace this new reality. One of them is Laura Carstensen. Carstensen has been on the forefront of research on aging for nearly 30 years. She's a professor of psychology at Stanford University, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, the author of several books and recipient of numerous distinguished awards.

The following five biggest myths about aging are based on her book, *A Long Bright Future*.

1. Older People Are Miserable

Happiness is not the domain of the young. In fact, quite the contrary. According to research on age and happiness, older people tend to be happier than young people.

Writes Carstensen: "With the exception of dementia-related diseases, which by definition have organic roots, mental health generally improves with age." Older people generally focus on the essential, don't sweat the small stuff, and enjoy their freedoms when their children leave the nest. (According to Carstensen, the empty nest syndrome is atypical. "Children make parents very happy... when they're living somewhere else," she writes.)

This "paradox of aging" has to do with a shift our perspectives as our sense of temporal reality changes. Simply put, the less time we have, the more we cherish it and the more expansive simple pleasures become. What age group is the most unhappy, stressed, and prone to depression? The 20-something demographic.

2. DNA Is Destiny

According to Carstensen, "one of the paradoxes of American longevity ... is that medical science has become powerful enough to rescue people from the brink of death but remains largely impotent when it comes to erasing the effects of the lifetime of bad habits that brought them there." In other words, having a healthy lifestyle is as important as having good genes when it comes to age and wellness.

Common sense prevails here. If you smoked a pack of cigarettes a day for decades, you'll pay later. Ditto for obesity, drug or alcohol addiction and lack of exercise. According to a Harvard University study that's been tracking longevity since the 1930's, there are seven lifestyle choices that don't necessarily trump genetics, but that certainly give us an edge: Don't smoke. Drink in moderation only. Exercise regularly. Keep your weight down. Cultivate stable emotional relationships. Get an education. Develop good coping skills for handling life's fast balls.

3. Work Hard, Retire Harder

We work long and hard. Our mid-lives are often filled with the stress of parenting, trying to save for retirement, and juggling multiple jobs. Then we're supposed to retire and do nothing for the next 30 years. "There is something wrong with this picture," writes Carstensen.

Carstensen calls for creating a new model where "work is less demanding and more satisfying throughout life." The operative word here is "throughout." Putting off pleasure and fulfillment until our much later years is not only folly; it's unhealthy. Writes Carstensen: "Time after retirement is the only stage in life that has been elongated. The problem isn't you, it's the model, which was built for short lives, not long ones. It makes no sense to cram all of the work into the beginning, and all of the relaxation into the end."

Adds Carstensen: "The beauty of a longer but more moderately paced career cycle would be that we could have more leisure throughout life, more time with our children while they are young, and remain engaged in our communities as we age, giving back some of the expertise we've accumulated throughout our time in the work force." A new "menu of options" would include part-time work, volunteer work or taking on an entirely new career.

4. Older People Drain Our Resources

The Scarcity Myth is precisely that: a myth. Longevity isn't feeding population growth. Booming youth populations in third world countries and other complex demographic shifts are the real problem.

Writes Carstensen: "Bottom line: Population growth is an issue, but Grandpa living longer is not the problem. The true issue is that the gift of increased longevity is unevenly distributed around the globe. In some parts of the world where the youth population is booming, those children may never have the chance to grow old." Meanwhile, the aging workforce is a truly massive force to contend with.

5. We Age Alone

According to Carstensen: "Aging is inevitable. *How* you age is not. You will very likely spend about three decades of your life as an old person. Deal with it. Death is the only alternative. If you can put behind you the fantasy of eternal youth, you can begin to plan seriously for what comes next. You can begin to think hard about the type of old person you want to be..."

Carstensen cites the burgeoning greying demographic as proof that that we will all, invariably, face old age together -- both in our local communities and as a global community.