

# The Power of Women

Harness Your Unique Strengths at Home, at Work, and in Your Community  
by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema



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## Could aging be good for women?

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According to popular culture, women are terrified of growing old and fight it with everything they have, spending billions of dollars each year on botox, liposuction, face creams, hair dyes, and health clubs. Early psychological theories argued that once a woman could no longer reproduce, she grew despondent, recognizing that her usefulness in life was now over. When her children grew up and left home, she was said to suffer from "[empty nest syndrome](#)" and melancholia.

Fortunately, none of this is true—at least for most women. Yes, many try to slow the [aging](#) process through expensive moisturizers and alpha hydroxy treatments, but on average, research finds that women's body images actually become more positive as they move from their twenties and thirties into [middle age](#).

Women's overall mental health and life satisfaction also improve with age. Rates of [depression](#), [anxiety](#), and [suicide](#) in women go down, not up, as they grow older. Women's general life satisfaction increases with age, and marital satisfaction goes up considerably when women's children leave home. Women feel less lonely as they grow older and feel more affirmed and appreciated in their marriages.

In a study of over 1,300 women and men from the San Francisco Bay area, I saw many signs that life gets better with age. In particular, levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and feelings of [loneliness](#) were lower among women in middle age (forty-five to fifty-five years old) and older age (sixty-five to seventy five years old), compared to those in young adulthood (twenty-five to thirty-five years old).

Women's lives get better instead of worse as they grow older because of their tremendous psychological strengths. Women use their mental strengths to tackle the new problems that arise as they age, such as navigating the health care system, or living on less income in retirement. They draw upon their [identity](#) strengths to manage the many changes that come with aging in their roles and capabilities, lifestyles, and living arrangements. Because of their relational strengths, women enter older age with a strong network of close relationships with people whom they trust and who want to reciprocate their empathy, patience, listening, and care. Women apply their emotional strengths to handling distress, empowering them to weather the crises and losses that come more often as we grow older. Women's full complement of strengths give them the mindset to celebrate older age as a time of joy, love, and fulfillment for all they have worked for and grown to be over their lifetimes.

Women's strengths help them to not only be happier in old age, but to live longer and more healthy lives. Psychologist Carol Ryff of the University of Wisconsin has found that older women who have developed many personal strengths show better immune system functioning, more good cholesterol, and better regulation of the neuroendocrine systems, all of which play a critical role in physical health.

Old age is not just about surviving, it's about flourishing. There is increasing evidence that most women feel a greater sense of fulfillment, self-actualization, reaching their peak- whatever you want to call it-as they grow older. For example, psychologist Abigail Stewart of the University of Michigan studied women who graduated from high school or college in the 1950s and '60s and found that as they grew older, they were more certain of their identity ("I have a sense of being my own person," "I feel my life is moving well"), felt more productive and generative ("I feel a new level of [productivity](#) or effectiveness," "I have influence in my community or area of interest") and were more confident in their power ("I feel I have the authority to do what I want," "I feel confident"). These women talked about having "come into their own," reaching a level of maturity, confidence, and competence that was not just satisfying but exhilarating.

Certainly, older age brings with it adversity, especially losses of physical health and of loved ones. Yet, I also believe that women's strengths make them exceptionally good at dealing with the losses that come with aging, and there is plenty of evidence for this belief. In our study of 1300 people, we asked people how they tended to cope with the inevitable stresses of life. In all three age groups-the younger adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults-women said they coped by trying to look at the situation from a new perspective (i.e., using reappraisal), finding solutions to the problems they faced, and reaching out to others for support. Among the older adults, who were facing the adversities that come with aging, the men showed less inclination to use these important coping skills compared to the women. In other words, older women were more likely than older men to tap their mental, emotional, and relational strengths to deal with adversity, which in turn left them less vulnerable to depression and anxiety in the face of difficulty. So let's celebrate and cultivate our psychological strengths and look forward to truly growing wiser as we grow older!

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