

# THE INNER SENSE OF AGE

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THE BIBLICAL FIRST MAN, ADAM, SUPPOSEDLY LIVED FOR 930 YEARS<sup>1</sup>. Other biblical figures lived for centuries as well. Today, in Abkhazia, legends exist about 600-year-old brides and 900-year-old grooms<sup>2</sup>. How long can a person live, evading evil fate, war, or even sickness? Gerontology, the science of aging and the longevity of life, proposes that the natural limit of life ranges from 120 to 180 years of age. The biblical answer was the following: "One hundred and twenty years"<sup>3</sup>. Moses's longevity was apparently the same<sup>4</sup>, but it was three thousand year ago. If true, would it really be possible today? Yes, according to the *Guinness World Records 2009*, the current champion of longevity is Jeanne Louise Calment of France who lived 122 years and 164 days<sup>5</sup>. On February 21, 1997 she celebrated her very last birthday.

Let us grant for a moment that such limits are indeed a reality for all people. Is it really true that everyone lives for the same period of time? If life's years were solely measured by the earth's rotations, it would not be necessary to write this. Rather, we will discuss psychological age, e.g. lost and discarded years, experienced as both lengthy and inconspicuously flashed through life.

Take, for example, the instructive parable in which a gravestone was inscribed: "Born in the year 1910... Died in the year 1970...Lived for three years." On the other hand, it is often said that one person's life can be equal to the lives of several people. Such a life is saturated with riches, substance, and value. Rudolf Balandin successfully addressed this idea while writing a biography<sup>6</sup>: "To measure the duration of human life in years is the same as estimating a book in pages, a picture in square meters, a sculpture in kilograms. Here the scales are different and the values are other: the achieved, the experienced, and the thought".

It is good when a person, at the conclusion of life's journey, says that their life has been filled with hundreds of years. What about a person who is thirty, forty, or even eighty years old who realizes that they are already psychologically two hundred years old? Is it possible that the more a person has done – the more intense life is, the more profound feelings and thoughts are – then the more hopeless and swift the aging process is?

Rather, the opposite is true. The lives of many artists attest to this: even in old age they are able to feel youthful.

Let us attempt to understand this contradictory situation. The most simple issue will be addressed first – the self-appraisal of age.

#### HOW OLD ARE YOU?

We propose that you participate in a mental experiment. Imagine that you suddenly learn that the age written on your passport, birth certificate, or driver's license is incorrect and you are uncertain whether the age shown is older or younger than your real age. Now try relying solely on an inner sense of your age, to answer the following simple question: How old are you actually? We can surmise with certitude that the "true age" (shown on documents) does not always coincide with a person's appraisal of their inner feeling of age.

We asked eighty-three highly educated people, age twenty-one to forty-four, to participate in the above experiment. Only every fourth person's subjective appraisal of age concurred (within one year) with their fixed date of birth. The greatest number of experiment participants (55%) felt that they were younger than their birth certificate indicated, while

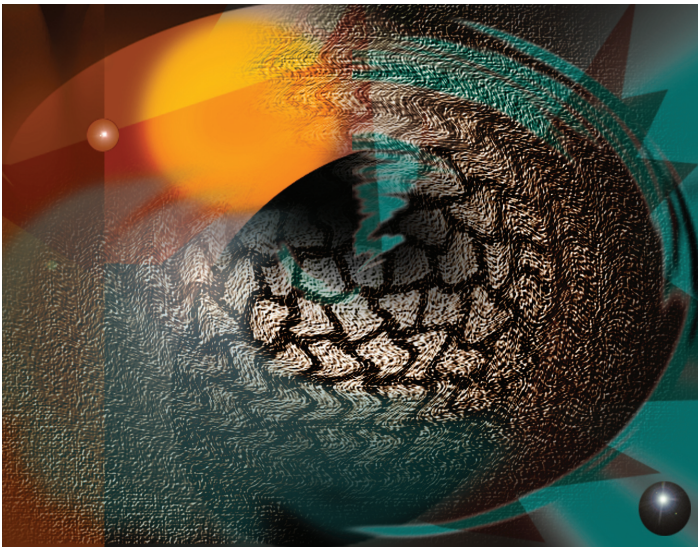
every fifth person felt that they were older than they truly were<sup>7</sup>.

It is interesting that after placing themselves in the given situation (described above) of "uncertain age," most participants reported feeling younger. Hence, there is some truth to a comedian's method for regaining youth<sup>8</sup>: "To become younger, it is necessary to abide by the following instructions. Simply seize the entire population's watches and calendars and heap them all in a pile on an embankment. As a result, we will then find ourselves without age. Who would know what age we are? She is twenty, he is forty? Who could count?"

The comedian hardly claimed that his method was practical. Even without destroying all the world's watches, calendars, and documents – many feel that they are younger than in reality. Half the participants in our study under thirty years of age felt that they were, on average, four years younger while 73% of the participants over thirty years of age also felt that they were younger. Moreover, these participants felt younger on average by eight years.

A person may feel younger for a variety of reasons. The simplest reason is to be flirtatious – the goal being to preserve "eternal youth." Economists have observed that clothing styles designed specifically for young people are enjoyed and in demand by an older age group. For example, the Ford Motor Company developed a sporty Mustang for a younger generation. The company was astonished to discover that people of all ages purchased their car<sup>9</sup>. Is it possible that a person who indulges in products and styles associated with youth, preserves their youthful feeling? Material items are only symbols of one age or another. A person's behavior, words, lifestyle, and position in society are the indicators that other people use when judging maturity. For each age, there are social norms and appropriate behavior.

American sociologists clearly state that most of the population thinks that the best age range for men to marry is from twenty to twenty-five years old, while between nineteen and twenty-four years old is the best range for women. A majority thinks that the best age range to begin a professional career is between twenty-four and twenty-six years old, while hitting the peak of your career should be reached when you are between forty-five and fifty years



Kat Kronick. At First, 2000. Digital Image.

The winning piece of art for the cover competition for the book, *Psychological Time of Personality* (by E.Golovakha and A.Kronik, Moscow: Smysl, 2008).

old, and retirement should occur between the ages sixty and sixty-five years old<sup>10</sup>. It was in 1960s and, of course, these relative norms vary from culture to culture, from generation to generation. It seems that deviations from such norms, as a rule, lead to stressful situations. For example, if a person were to marry at a very young or old age, that person would not be following the normal "timetable of life" and most likely would experience intense difficulties. Early marriages often experience financial trouble, while late marriages often experience psychological difficulties.

Oriented by universally accepted age norms for different life events, a person senses whether they are young or old. Ukrainian sociologist Natalie Panina hypothesized that people who have not attained the typical social position for their age group will feel younger<sup>11</sup>. We verified this supposition by comparing the self-appraisal of age of two groups: married and unmarried people, ranging from twenty-three to twenty-five years old. Our research was conducted in the former Soviet Union, 1982 (Kiev, Ukraine). At that time, the most common years of marriage for Soviet men and women was the period between ages twenty-three and twenty-five<sup>12</sup>. It followed that marriage was expected by society for a person of this age. How does this person feel about himself? When a person had not settled down and married, they almost always felt younger (79% of the time). On the other hand, a person who had married felt older (63% of the time).

So far we have discussed the connection between a person's feeling of age and their achievements and social position. This combination is a person's "social age." For psychologists, the "internal system of appraisal" is more significant. It has become evident that the same achievements or events are evaluated differently by different people. Two people of the same age, who were both married at an "appropriate age," may weigh events differently. One of them may be interested in sacrificing for family and achievement, while the other may desire to maintain a bachelor's lifestyle and gives marriage only secondary importance. In the first case, marriage brings immediate "aging." In the second case, it is unlikely that marriage will bring simultaneous "aging." Over the course of our research, we came across twenty-three- to twenty-five-year-old-men and -women who felt younger than twenty years old.

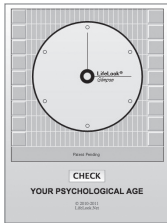
It is true that the feeling of youth does not depend on a person's ability to remain socially immature and infantile. Socially infantile personality types are not a rarity. Character traits of this personality type include being: egocentric, opinionated, and outspoken. These people often end up bothering themselves and others alike. Then why does each of us, at various ages, wish to be younger? Immaturity is not the only characteristic associated with youth. Youth, which is admired and sought out, does not consider how many years a person has lived, but considers how one views the future (perceiving the future to be more valuable than that which has already been experienced and achieved). A person's psychological age is similar to a two sided scale. On one side is the past and on the other is the future. When the past outweighs the future (proving to be more significant) – a person feels older. When the future outweighs the past – a person feels younger.

Thus, it is possible to feel younger and younger as time advances. This occurs when the future does not contract, but opens to new prospective developments as the years go on. At this point, a person does not stop with what they have achieved to date, but they continue to aspire to more significant accomplishments. If the most important events have already occurred and are realized, a person feels older and their psychological age no longer corresponds to their driver's license.

#### HOW CAN PSYCHOLOGICAL AGE BE MEASURED?

The easiest method to figure out the degree of life's realization is by answering the following question: "If all the substance of your life (events of the past, present, and future in full) is considered to be 100%, then what percent would you allot to the substance experienced to date?" We have heard many answers to this question. The answers ranged from 10% - 90% (the average was 41%).

With the knowledge of how a person evaluates what they have done and experienced, it is possible to determine their psychological age (PA). To do so, it is necessary to multiply the personal "index of realization" (R) by the number of years that a person expects to live (L):  $PA = R \times L$ . Let us make the computation using a person whose life is only half realized and expects life to be 120 years. This person's psychological age would be sixty years old ( $0.5 \times 120$ ).



This figure is not influenced by the person's actual age, whether forty or eighty years old. It follows that, the longer a person expects to live and the less he or she expects to accomplish, the higher the psychological age. If you wish to check your PA, you can do so by completing the on-line test at [www.PsychologicalAge.com](http://www.PsychologicalAge.com)

You may not be pleased with the results of the test. Did you hope to be psychologically younger or older? Do not despair – psychological age can fluctuate. To accomplish this, it is necessary to alter your attitude on life.

#### BECOMING YOUNGER OR GROWING OLDER?

A person is often dissatisfied with their age. As a child or teenager, a person wants to look and act older. At a mature age, they look back on their youth with nostalgia. While growing older, people search for various remedies that enable them to become younger. If psychological age is understood as a measure of realized life, a person has the opportunity (at any chronological age) to escape from the limits of their predetermined destiny. Nevertheless, the possibilities are clearly limited. At a young age, the interval of the chronological past is too small to be filled with many life experiences. At an old age, all of the reserves of the future have been exhausted so that "perspective lines" become shorter.

On the other hand, due to the ability to visit the past or the future in one's imagination, a person can sometimes successfully outwit chronological age. For example, to reduce the weight of the past (the specific weight of one's life), the past is made into the present or even the future. A person reverting back to the past lives there to compensate psychologically for biological and social old age. Absorbed by memories of youth, a person makes actual connections out of events that have been experienced earlier. As a result, their sense of age grows younger. In his time, Epicurus substantiated the benefits of studying philosophy in a similar fashion<sup>13</sup>: "As he grows old, he can look back with satisfaction over his past and let the good things he has gained keep him young." A similar rejuvenation is evident when a person is fatally ill. The person attempts to find shelter in the past and constantly reverts back to impressions of their youth before dying<sup>14</sup>.

The displacement of the "self" in the future may lead to various effects. When "living in the future," the past becomes larger and a person feels older than when "living in the present." Inadequate maturity in a teenager can be hidden in the fact that their personality is located in a future that is overcrowded with plans, projects, and the experience of accomplishment. Therefore, they often perceive a long journey to these plans that have not yet been realized.

There is still yet another method to determine psychological rejuvenation and aging. This is the re-evaluation of the importance of the past and future.

It is certainly true that people can view a particular moment differently from the way in which that moment has been viewed in the past. The most recent appraisal reveals either a new and differing doom that previously went undetected, or a clouding by suddenly realized mistakes and estimated losses. During moments like this, a person grows psychologically older as the past gains significantly more weight in their eyes. If a person does not display a fresh attitude toward life, premature psychological aging can occur. At times, signs of aging are viewed as the desire to attain an inflated self-importance, an illusion of knowledge, an earlier conservatism, or a skeptical view of the future. In an extreme case, a kind of "personality numbing" follows – a psychological death when a person needs nothing but rest. As the years progress, it becomes more difficult to resist the past. Often a temptation arises to revert to the past and recapture the pleasures of younger dates.

In order for this not to happen, we need to work on our future – to be patient, to hope, to dream, and to plan.

Once a person has become exhausted in one area of activity, it is important to attempt to find a new area. The search must consider the principles of those scientists who, after several years, have switched from solving previous problems to the statement and solution of new problems. Goals and plans make a person younger, not just psychologically. The former Yugoslavian agricultural scientist, R. Savich, computed that the average horticulturist's life is longer than the lives of people in other occupations<sup>15</sup>. He explains this phenomenon by observing that such a person must wait for a long time (possibly decades) to attain his or her goal of developing a new type

of plant. It is possible that lofty goals not only contribute to people's youth, but increase the duration of their life as well. Maybe you do not have enough long-term goals?

As the crown of a tree cannot live without roots, a personality does not exist without collective experience. Completely rejuvenated, the oblivion of the past leads to "childhood at a mature age." At birth, there is the childhood illusion of a limitless future. However, with time, hopes are replaced by a feeling of lack of fulfillment and a distrust of personal strength. A mid-life crisis follows in those who have yet to find themselves.

To escape a mid-life crisis, do not feel that you are wasting your time by reflecting on your accomplishments. Although your life may contain many mistakes, it is necessary to respect the past. The past should be valued because "maturity reached slowly and against many obstacles, illnesses cured, griefs and despairs overcome, and unconscious risk taken; maturity formed through so many desires, hopes, regrets, forgotten things, loves. A man's age represents a fine cargo of experiences and memories"<sup>16</sup>.

What is better – to feel younger or older than our true age indicates? Probably it is most desirable when chronological age and psychological age are not far apart. If it is natural for a teenager to wish to be older and for older people to wish to be younger, then it is most important for middle-aged people to have harmony, perspective, and experience.

#### NOTES:

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