

# TRENDS & Ideas

## HEALTH

### Resilience: The Key to Successful Aging

Thanks to medical advances, people are living longer. And those persons who have the most resilience are experiencing a "second adulthood" (from age 45 to 85 and older), a time of "rebirth that offers exhilarating new possibilities," Gail Sheehy writes in *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time* (Random House, New York City, 1995; excerpted in *U.S. New & World Report*). Sheehy advises persons in their early forties to prepare for their second adulthood so

they won't squander the opportunities this time of life offers.

Sheehy says that contemporary people need "multiple identities"—a more fluid sense of self that allows them to adapt to unexpected career changes, divorces, illnesses. In a crisis, she explains, "people with more than one identity can draw upon other sources of self-esteem while they regroup."

Sheehy refers to our fifties as the Age of Mastery, a time when we are able to rely on



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our experience. The psychologically healthiest 50-year-olds are those who changed their expectations and goals as they aged, shaping a new self by calling on strengths that were dormant when they were younger, report studies from the University of California at Berkeley.

During our sixties we move into the Age of Integrity, "primarily a stage of spiritual growth," according to Sheehy. Since a mere 10 percent of persons aged 65 and older have chronic health problems that restrict physical activity, most persons in their sixties are free to

engage in "a conscious commitment to continuing self-education," she says.

Who handles these passages with the most ease? Men tend to be burdened by uncertainty and a resigned acceptance of life as it is. But such troubles seem to leave women alone: Many become happier as they age, points out Sheehy. Such women experience the excitement of self-knowledge that had eluded them when they were younger and tending to other priorities such as children, she reports.

In a survey she conducted, Sheehy found that women in their fifties who have optimum well-being see themselves as survivors rather than former victims. On the other hand, researchers have found that men older than 50 are "becoming somewhat more dependent on their wives emotionally and financially, and less certain about their future goals," reports Sheehy. Psychologist Ellen McGrath adds that the anxiety and depression experienced by men in their second adulthood have made them the new at-risk population.

## MENTAL HEALTH

### Touch-Tone Diagnosis

Computerized telephone technology can provide a low-cost, accessible, confidential way of assessing callers' complaints of depression, report Lee Baer, PhD, et al., in *JAMA*.

In their study, the authors offered screening for depressive symptoms to individuals at a large Midwestern university and a big high-technology firm in the Northeast. Mounting publicity campaigns in those places, the authors urged residents to call a toll-free phone number for advice concerning such symptoms. A total of 1,812 persons responded.

Callers heard a recorded voice asking a series of questions about the severity of their symptoms. To respond, participants pressed different touch-tone buttons, thus feeding the answers into a computer, which then immediately evaluated the information



and interpreted it for the callers. Participants who showed evidence of depression were given phone numbers to call for more information and possible therapy.

Of the 1,812 callers, 70.6 percent described symptoms of at least minimal depression. That number was congruent with the average 76.6 percent of people found each year to show similar symptoms in face-to-face interviews with healthcare professionals on National Depression Screening Day.

Depression is a common mental illness that nevertheless often goes undiagnosed and, therefore, untreated. Technology may offer an effective, inexpensive way to screen large numbers of people for depressive symptoms, the study suggests.

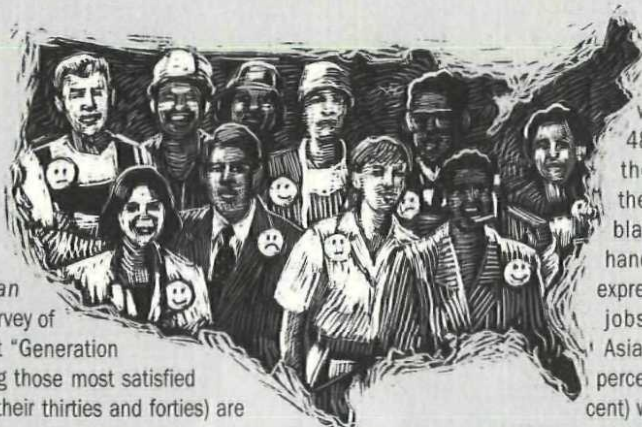
WORK

## Boomers Gloomy about Jobs

Employers nowadays want their workers to be happy. That is because the trend toward "empowerment"—giving employees more control of the work process—means unhappy workers can cause a company more damage than the old-fashioned powerless kind could.

Are U.S. workers happy? Basically yes, writes Michael Reinemer in *American Demographics*. His article, based on a survey of 4,336 employees, says surprisingly that "Generation Xers" (workers under age 30) are among those most satisfied with their jobs. Baby Boomers (those in their thirties and forties) are among the least satisfied.

The different moods may be due to different generational expectations, Reinemer says. Xers grew up in a new world of limits, of corporate restructuring and downsizing, and are not shocked by it. Boomers, who grew up in boom times, were unprepared for the economic turbulence of



more recent years.

Like Boomers, African Americans are less happy than others with their work lives. For example, 48 percent of white employees say they are satisfied with the size of their paychecks. Only 32 percent of blacks say the same. On the other hand, 72 percent of Hispanic workers expressed overall satisfaction with their jobs (compared with 70 percent of Asians, 65 percent of whites, and 56 percent of blacks). More women (66 percent) were cheerful about job issues than

men (63 percent).

Exploring the reasons behind women's and Hispanics' job satisfaction, Reinemer suggests, might help employers lift the morale of other workers. Given the economic realities of the 1990s, he writes, employers ought to be seeking a happier work force.

TECHNOLOGY

## Cybersickness

The side effects some virtual-reality (VR) game users experience are real and could mean expensive lawsuits for the games' manufacturers, report Neil Gross, Dori Jones Yang, and Julia Flynn in *Business Week*.

Although game manufacturers have been testing VR for several years, they are not being open about their findings on its side effects, the authors state. As a result, "designers can't correct for mistakes that have already been made by other companies," says University of Edinburgh psychologist John Wann, who studies VR-related complaints.

VR game players are subject to eye strain as a result

of staring at low-resolution images. Some physicians recommend playing no longer than an hour. A somewhat more unpleasant side effect, nausea, occurs when the game player's head position and the game's visual signals are out of synch.

The most unsettling side effects are LSD-like flashbacks. To resolve the conflict between the audio and visual illusions of motion and the lack of other physical cues, "the brain forges new neural pathways, which can cause flashbacks hours later," report Gross, Yang, and Flynn.

Physical side effects are not VR's only drawbacks,



they add. Psychologists are worried too. Just as computer networks allow users to change their personalities, backgrounds, and genders in cyberspace, VR will allow them to "flesh out these alternate personae and project these creations into vir-

tual bodies or any other virtual space," the authors note. Warns McGill University psychologist Glenn F. Cartwright, this "may bring new kinds of emotional disturbances and mental illnesses."

Still, VR has its merits.

For example, it could be useful in ergonomic assessments of workplaces, engineer training, and surgical applications, reports John R. Wilson, director of the University of Nottingham's Virtual Reality Applications Research Team.