

# Childlessness and psychological well-being in midlife and old Age

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## Definition

This entry reviews the literature on the relationship between parental status and [psychological well-being](#) in middle and old age. Psychological well-being is defined broadly, in order to capture the complexity of the costs and benefits of having children or not for well-being. This review focuses on indicators of positive and negative, cognitive, and affective well-being: [life satisfaction](#), [happiness](#), positive and negative effect, depression, and loneliness.

Most studies define “parents” as the status of having living biological and/or adopted children and “childless” as the status of never having had such children. Yet, there is some variation and ambiguity in how studies have categorized stepchildren, adopted children, and parents who have outlived all of their children.

## Description

A vast literature has examined relationships between parental status and various indicators of [subjective well-being](#) in younger adults. This literature shows that people generally are happier without having (resident) children (for a review, see Hansen, [2012](#)). Fewer studies have explored such relationships in midlife and old age. There are reasons to expect that detrimental effects of childlessness may surface later in life. First, involuntary childlessness may lead to a sense of loss or failure, which may depress positive self-evaluations. Such consequences may be more evident in “older” populations, when childlessness is more likely to be permanent. They may also be more pronounced for women, as traditional ideas suggest that parenthood is more salient and rewarding to women than to men. Because childlessness prior to the 1960s was predominantly involuntary (due to nonmarriage, late marriage, or infertility), childlessness represents a disruption of the expected and projected life course for the bulk of childless persons in midlife and old age (e.g., Hagestad and Call, [2007](#)). Second, a violation of *social* expectations can have similar psychological implications as not having met *personal* expectations. Although the stigma of childlessness has softened, it still persists, especially in older cohorts (Connidis, [2001](#); Sternke and Abrahamson, 2015). There are, however, marked cross-national variations in [attitudes](#) toward childlessness. In Europe, the percentage that strongly disapproves of voluntary childlessness ranges from 6 % to 8 % in the UK and the Nordic countries to 70–83 % in some of the former socialist countries (Huijts et al., [2013](#)). Third, childless persons will not enjoy the purported rewards of grandparenthood, such as an enhanced sense of engagement, [purpose in life](#), and well-being. Fourth, adult development theory stresses the centrality

of parenthood for adult psychosocial development (Erikson, [1963](#)). Generativity is a key developmental task of midlife, which involves supporting and guiding the next generation, and is supposedly linked to mental health. The opposing tendency is obsessive self-indulgence, which is thought to be damaging for healthy development. Past research has found lower generativity for childless persons compared to parents, particularly among men (McAdams and De St. Aubin, [1992](#)). Finally, research consistently links childlessness with lower access to companionship and support in old age, especially when it coincides with widowhood or poor health (Connidis, [2001](#); Deindl and Brandt, 2017; Dykstra, 2015)

## Results

The following review reports results from analyses that minimally control for partnership status, to isolate the effect of parental status from that of partnership status. It also only includes studies of persons aged 40 and over. Because of limitations on references, some sources are left out. The reader is referred to a review (Hansen, [2012](#)) for a longer list of references.

### Life Satisfaction and Happiness

Studies typically find positive or nonsignificant effects of childlessness on life satisfaction and happiness in midlife and nonsignificant or negative effects in old age. Most studies of mid- and late-life adults in Western countries find nonsignificant effects of parental status on happiness and life satisfaction, for men and women (e.g., Koropecj-Cox et al., [2007](#); Shields and Wooden, [2003](#)). In Western Europe, even among the very old, parental status does not make a decisive difference. Except for a small negative effect in Dutch men, no statistically significant association was identified linking childlessness to life satisfaction in studies of 661 Dutch aged 70–89 and 516 Germans aged 70–100 (Dykstra and Wagner, [2007](#)). Parental status also has no effect on life satisfaction among 105 Swedes aged over 90 (mostly women) (Hilleras et al., [2001](#)).

However, in aggregate World Values Survey (WVS) data from 94 countries, the effect of childlessness on life satisfaction is positive in the ages 45–54, near zero in the ages 55–64, and negative in the ages 65+ (Stanca, [2009](#)). Similarly, a WVS study examining happiness shows a near-zero effect in the ages 40–49, and a negative effect above age 50 that is more pronounced for women (Margolis and Myrskylä, [2011](#)). As indicated, childless persons are generally happier than parents with resident children but equally or less happy than empty-nest parents. The results also suggest that although having children increases exposure to significant stressors, it may be an investment in future well-being.

The effects of parental status on life satisfaction and happiness are contextually sensitive. Margolis and Myrskylä ([2011](#)) find the most positive effect of having resident children in the Nordic countries, whose social policies provide extensive supports to young families. This finding is corroborated by recent Norwegian data showing a small but significant positive impact of having children (both resident and nonresident) on life satisfaction, but only among women (Hansen et al., [2009](#)). A weak salutary effect of children on life satisfaction is also found among Swedish middle-aged women (Daukantaite and Zukauskienė, [2006](#)). Furthermore, Margolis and Myrskylä ([2011](#)) show a stronger negative impact of childlessness among elderly in former socialist countries, where older people are dependent on kin for help. In China, where children are the most important sources

of social, financial, and emotional support for elderly parents (Chou and Chi, [2004](#)), parenthood only been shown to have a significant positive effect on life satisfaction among elderly aged 60 and above (Guo, 2014; Zhang and Liu, [2007](#)). This association is attributed to lack of monetary support and social stigma and low social esteem among the childless (Guo, 2014).

## **Depression and Loneliness**

The effect of parental status on depression and loneliness corresponds with those for happiness and life satisfaction. In China, childlessness is related to higher levels of depression and loneliness (Chou and Chi, [2004](#); Guo, 2014; Wu and Penning, 2019). Research from a range of Western countries, however, shows that having children has no implications for depression and loneliness (e.g., Gibney et al., 2017; Hansen et al., [2009](#); Zhang and Hayward, [2001](#)). This pattern emerges also in analyses of pooled pan-European data (Gibney et al., 2017; Hank and Wagner, 2013). Yet, some Western studies link childlessness with more depression and loneliness among the widowed (see below).

A study of adults over age 40 in 24 European countries shows that in the aggregate sample, childlessness is associated with more depressive symptoms among men (compared with both residential and empty-nest parenthood), but not among women (Huijts et al., [2013](#)). However, there is marked cross-national variation in these effects. For both sexes, childlessness is associated with more depressive symptoms in countries where society is disapproving of childlessness and where people are dependent on kinship for help in old age (some Southeast European and former socialist countries). Childlessness has no effect on depression in Northern European welfare states.

## **Positive and Negative Affect**

Parental status also does not appear to have an effect on composite positive and negative affect scales measuring a broad range of emotions (e.g., Hansen et al., [2009](#)), with the exception of one US study finding that empty-nest parents report somewhat higher positive affect than both childless persons and parents with residential children (Umberson and Gove, [1989](#)).

## **Moderators**

Compared to studies of younger families, research on the psychological implications of parental status in older age has addressed diversity to a far lesser extent. In addition, the available studies find conflicting associations between parental status and well-being based on demographic characteristics.

There is some indication that negative impacts of childlessness may surface or increase when coinciding with *widowhood*. A small negative effect of childlessness on *life satisfaction* among the widowed has been shown globally (Stanca, [2009](#)) and in the USA (Koropecykj-Cox et al., [2007](#)), Australia (Shields and Wooden, [2003](#)), and the Netherlands (van der Pers et al., 2015). Similarly, some studies find a higher risk of *loneliness* and *depression* among the widowed childless (e.g., Wagner et al., [1999](#)), impacting men at greater rates than women (e.g., Zhang and Hayward, [2001](#)). However, a range of Northern European studies fail to show a negative effect of childlessness on

various indicators of well-being among the widowed (e.g., Dykstra and Wagner, [2007](#); Hansen et al., [2009](#)).

There is little indication that the effects of parental status on various well-being outcomes differ by *education* or socioeconomic status in midlife and old age (Hansen et al., [2008](#), [2009](#)).

A key distinguishing factor among the childless is whether they are *childless for voluntary or involuntary reasons*. The transition to biological childlessness can be a major crisis for couples, associated with [stress](#), depression, and low life satisfaction, especially for women (see Hansen, [2012](#)). It is unclear whether this vulnerability persists, as one study finds no difference in life satisfaction between voluntary and involuntary women aged 25–50 (McQuillan et al., [2007](#)). A separate study of older men and women also finds no difference for happiness, but the involuntary childless (especially women) report lower life satisfaction than the voluntary childless (Connidis and McMullin, [1993](#)).

## Discussion

There is little to suggest that not having children jeopardizes well-being in midlife and old age. A growing international literature shows that childlessness has few costs for psychological well-being and may even be associated with enhanced well-being. Compared to parents with resident children, the childless are typically happier and more satisfied with life and report less psychological distress. The childless seem to benefit from avoiding many of the strains of parenthood, such as time constraints, daily demands, marital stress, and [work-family conflict](#) (Hansen, [2012](#)).

The literature also indicates that although infertile persons may go through a phase of finding life empty and unfulfilling, involuntary childlessness usually does not cause a continuing sense of loss. Childless adults generally seem to find companionship, support, and a sense of meaning in ways other than parenting (e.g., via marital, friendship, and work roles). It is long established that childless persons show great creativity in negotiating alternative social ties over the life course. For example, the childless report more active ties with friends and extended family (e.g., siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews), and these often serve as sources of companionship and support for childless people (e.g., Dykstra, 2015; Dykstra and Wagner, [2007](#)).

Importantly, however, there are conditions under which childlessness may be detrimental to well-being. First, childlessness may reduce well-being in cultures less accepting of (voluntary) childlessness. Childlessness may also compromise well-being when it coincides with [widowhood](#) or poor health (mobility), especially in countries where old-age support is largely the responsibility of the family. Although childless persons tend to negotiate alternative ties over the life course, these relationships may not be as reliable in providing long-term support. For this reason, childless elderly more often than parents suffer support deficits in older age, even in an advanced welfare state like Sweden (Larsson and Silverstein, [2004](#); Vikström et al., 2011). The reason why the widowed may fare worse than the never-married is because whereas never-married childless adults tend to be quite successful in building alternative networks over the life course, the married, and especially men, more often rely exclusively on their partner for support and companionship (Dykstra and Wagner, [2007](#)).

One potential caveat concerns the stronger selection of socially isolated older childless persons than parents into institutionalized care (e.g., Dykstra, 2015; Wagner et al., [1999](#)). The elderly childless respondents living at home (and thus eligible to taking part in the surveys) may constitute the most socially integrated and most happy among childless persons, thus masking the psychological benefits of having children for the oldest cohort. Concomitantly, more research is necessary for investigating the consequences of parental status in the frail and the oldest old, who typically are not represented in large surveys.

This review resolves and debunks some of the myths about parental status and well-being. This clarification is important as commentators and policymakers are trying to curb and understand the consequences of the rapid growth in childlessness across Western nations. Estimates show that childlessness among women born after 1970 is likely to range between 15 % and 25 % in industrialized countries (Sobotka, [2004](#)).

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