

Most of Us Have Made Best Memories by Age 25

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By the time most people are 25, they have made the most important memories of their lives, according to new research from the University of New Hampshire.

Researchers at UNH have found that when older adults were asked to tell their life stories, they overwhelmingly highlighted the central influence of life transitions in their memories. Many of these transitions, such as marriage and having children, occurred early in life.

“When people look back over their lives and recount their most important memories, most divide their life stories into chapters defined by important moments that are universal for many: a physical move, attending college, a first job, marriage, military experience, and having children,” said Kristina Steiner, a doctoral student in psychology at UNH and the study’s lead researcher.

The research team also included David Pillemer, Dr. Samuel E. Paul Professor of Developmental Psychology at UNH; Dorthe Kirkegaard Thomsen, professor of psychology and behavioral sciences at the University of Aarhus (Denmark); and Andrew Minigan, an undergraduate student in psychology at UNH. The researchers present the results of their study, [“The reminiscence bump in older adults’ life story transitions,”](#) in the journal *Memory*.

In the first study to use a naturalistic approach by collecting free-flowing life stories, researchers spoke with 34 members of an active retirement community, ages 59 to 92. All the participants were white, and 76 percent had earned at least an undergraduate degree. Participants were asked to tell their life stories in 30 minutes. One week later, participants divided their life stories into self-defined “chapters.”

In the UNH study, researchers found a pronounced “reminiscence bump” between ages 17 and 24, when many people defined chapters of their life story beginning and ending. A reminiscence bump is a period of time between the ages of 15 and 30 when many memories, positive and negative, expected and unexpected, are recalled.

“Many studies have consistently found that when adults are asked to think about their lives and report memories, remembered events occurring between the ages of 15 to 30 are over-represented. I wanted to know why this might be. Why don’t adults report more memories from the ages of 30 to 70? What is it about the ages of 15 to 30 that make them so much more memorable?” Steiner asked.

“Our life narratives are our identity. By looking at life narratives, researchers can predict levels of well-being and psychological adjustment in adults. Clinical therapists can use life narrative therapy to help people work through issues and problems in their lives by helping them see patterns and themes,” said Steiner, who studies autobiographical memory.

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