

Happiness peaks at 82. It's all downhill from there

Alice Hutton

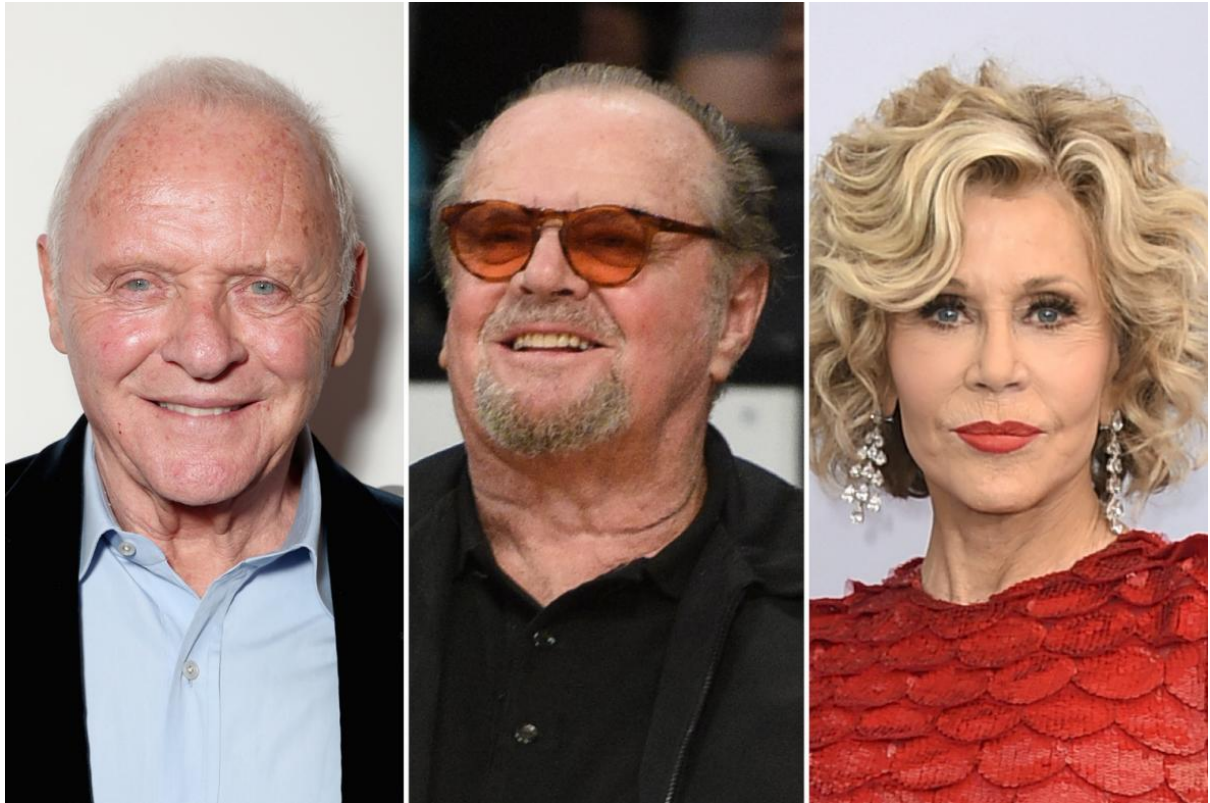
Sunday February 09 2020, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



It may not be the only good news that Anthony Hopkins gets today if he wins the Best Supporting Actor award at tonight's Oscars.

Happiness peaks at the age of 82, according to the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, who has said it declines in our thirties and starts to pick up from the age of 54.

The author and cognitive psychologist — who has 20 years to wait until his happiness will peak, if his research is correct — analysed hundreds of studies from institutions including Harvard and journals such as *Nature*. “As a group [older generations] are actually happier than younger people,” he says in his book *The Changing Mind*, billed as a “neuroscientist's guide to ageing well”, which will be published this month.



Anthony Hopkins, Jack Nicholson and Jane Fonda are all 82

He says his findings of a “sharp” increase in happiness from the age of 54 “holds true across 72 countries from Albania to Zimbabwe”.

As well as Hopkins, who is nominated for his role playing Pope Benedict in *The Two Popes*, his fellow Hollywood stars Jack Nicholson, Morgan Freeman, Dustin Hoffman and Jane Fonda are also 82.

Levitin attributes late-life happiness partly to the readjustment of the “too high expectations” of youth to “realise that life is pretty good”.

Other important factors were exercise, trying new experiences, nurturing loving relationships and cutting off toxic ones, he adds.

Politics counts, too: one Harvard study found that conservative-voting men’s sex lives stopped at 68, while those of liberal-voting males carried on in their eighties.

Levitin cites Fonda's Netflix series *Grace and Frankie*, in which she features alongside her 9 to 5 co-star Lily Tomlin, 80, as two pensioners who discover a new zest for life after their lawyer husbands leave them so they can marry each other. Fonda told The Washington Post: "One of the things that Lily and I are proud of . . . is showing that you may be old, you may be in your third act, but you can still be vital and sexual and funny . . . that life isn't over."