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Wisdom, Selective Engagement Help Older Adults Cope with Aging

By RICK NAUERT PHD *Senior News Editor*

Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on July 17, 2014

Emerging research suggests older adults have tricks up their sleeve to combat cognitive aging.

A set of three articles in a recent edition of the journal *Perspectives in Psychological Science* discusses a variety of factors — including motivation and crystallized knowledge — that help to support and maintain cognitive function among the elderly.

One study examined the dichotomy between lab data which offer evidence of age-related declines in cognitive function, and applied research that finds many older adults appear to function quite well in their everyday lives.

In this context, psychological scientist Dr. Thomas Hess of North Carolina State University sets forth a motivational framework of “selective engagement” to explain the apparent contradiction.

If the cognitive cost of engaging in difficult tasks increases as we age, older adults may be less motivated to expend limited cognitive resources on difficult tasks or on tasks that are not personally relevant to them.

“This selectivity,” Hess argues, “may allow older adults to improve performance on the tasks they do choose to engage in, thereby helping to account for inconsistencies between lab-based and real-world data.”

Another factor in maintaining cognitive acumen as we age is that although episodic memory — memory for the events of our day-to-day lives — seems to decline with age, memory for general knowledge does not.

Researchers at Duke University, graduate student Sharda Umanath and Dr. Elizabeth Marsh, reviewed evidence suggesting that older adults use prior knowledge to fill in gaps caused by failures of episodic memory, in ways that can both hurt and help overall cognitive performance.

While reliance on prior knowledge can make it difficult to inhibit past information when learning new information, it can also make older adults more resistant to learning new erroneous information.

Thus, being stubborn may, at times, be an effective strategy.

According to Umanath and Marsh, future research should focus on better understanding this compensatory mechanism and whether it can be harnessed in developing cognitive interventions and tools.

Finally, popular writers and academics often argue that older adults, due to certain cognitive differences, are especially susceptible to consumer fraud.

In a new study, psychological scientists Michael Ross, Igor Grossmann, and Emily Schryer of the University of Waterloo in Canada reviewed the available data to examine whether incidences of consumer fraud are actually higher among older adults.

They discovered that while there isn't much research that directly answers this question, the research that does exist suggests that older adults may be less frequent victims than other age groups.

Accordingly, Ross, Grossmann, and Schryer argue that anti-fraud policies should be aimed at protecting consumers of all ages.

In summary, while some forms of cognitive decline are a function of aging, knowledge, wisdom, and selective engagement allow elderly the ability to adapt and prosper during their golden years.

Source: [Association for Psychological Science](#)



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