

The aging brain puts accent on the positive

By TOM VALEO

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Mention the aging brain and most people think of decline. Processing speed slows, short-term memory weakens, and the incidence of Alzheimer's disease and other brain problems climbs rapidly after 60.

But in one way, the aging brain actually improves. Laura Carstensen, a psychologist at Stanford University in California, has detected what she calls a "positivity bias" among older people. That means they pay less attention to negative information and more to positive information. As a result, older people, despite the physical decline that accompanies aging, tend to be pretty happy.

"Mental health in older adults is much better than in middle-age and younger adults," said Carstensen. "They have lower rates of every kind of psychopathology except for Alzheimer's disease."

This shift toward positive emotions may result, in part, from physical changes in the aging brain, Carstensen said, but she believes older people also recognize that time is running out, and they decide they had better make the most of the time they have left.

"That focuses people on what's really important," she said, "and for most people, what's important is what's emotionally meaningful."

Carstensen is not the only one who has noticed that older people often seem to enjoy life more as they age.

Psychologist Daniel K. Mroczek of Fordham University in New York surveyed 2,727 men and women ages 25-74 to determine how age, gender, marital status, education, health and other factors affect well-being. What he found was that age itself predicted a more positive mental state.

"The older the person was, the more he or she reported positive emotions like cheerfulness, life satisfaction, and overall happiness within the past 30 days," Mroczek wrote in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. "And surprisingly, the younger participants reported more negative emotions, like feeling sad, nervous, hopeless or worthless." Although elderly white males have the highest suicide rate of any group, Mroczek found that older men in his study, especially those who were married, reported being the happiest and having the least amount of negative emotion. Older women also reported more positive emotions than younger women. How does Mroczek account for this increase in happiness among people nearing the end of their lives?

"From our research," Mroczek wrote, "we have seen that older adults regulate their emotions more effectively than younger or middle-age adults. We can propose that older individuals seem to be able to know, through their years of experience, what kinds of external events increase or decrease their positive and negative emotions. Therefore, they achieve a better 'emotional balance' by selecting people and situations that will minimize negative and maximize positive emotions."

Another researcher has found that older people who volunteer to help children learn to read seem to grow

even happier.

Dr. Linda Fried, director of the Center on Aging and Health at Johns Hopkins University, studied 128 older people ages 60-86 who volunteered at six Baltimore public schools. The volunteers, primarily African-American women, helped children develop their reading skills and find appropriate books in the school library.

At the end of the study, volunteers reported feeling much stronger physically than a control group that did not volunteer. The use of a cane among volunteers decreased by 50 percent, compared to only 20 percent in the control group. Volunteers also watched less TV, while members of the control group watched 18 percent more.

"A lot of older adults spend 4 to 5 hours a day watching TV," Fried said. "Some activities stimulate brain activity. TV watching doesn't, and may have negative effects because it's a very passive activity."

Fried suspects that the philosophy of "use it or lose it" explains why the volunteers improved more than members of the control group.

"We theorize that if people have to get to school three or four days a week, they're increasing their physical activity," she said. "Also, we designed volunteer roles to enhance mental activity - how to read to children, for example, and how to listen to children read so you can help them with their literacy skills. There's mounting evidence that staying mentally as well as physically active may help preserve brain function."

In addition, the volunteers reported an increase in the number of people they could turn to for help; Fried believes this contributes to a sense of well-being. "Having social support and social networks, and staying socially engaged, all seem to be good for one's psychological state," she said.

According to Fried, volunteering "gives sense of meaning and purpose in life that's extremely important to well-being. You're making a difference and contributing to the world around you."

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To learn more about volunteering opportunities in your area, visit www.getinvolved.gov or www.mentoring.org

- Tom Valeo is a freelancer who writes about medical and health issues. Write to him c/o Seniority, the St. Petersburg Times, P.O. Box 1121, St. Petersburg, FL 33731 or e-mail features@sptimes.com

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