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## Wizened, Yes, but Not Always Wiser

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

AGING well can mean different things to different people - leisure for gardening, mimosas for breakfast, day games at Wrigley Field - but everyone expects to graduate from middle age with at least a passing grade in Wisdom 101. The furrowed brow, the slow nod of understanding, the soulful stare in contemplation of another's dilemma: these are the rec-league trophies of later life, the reward for just showing up.

That is why it is so jarring to hear confessions of late-life befuddlement, even from those who have made a living from it. Everything they tell you, about "getting joy and having a kind of wisdom in your golden years - it's all tripe," [Woody Allen](#), who turns 70 next month, says in the new issue of *Vanity Fair*. "I've gained no insight, no mellowing. I would make the same mistakes again."

O.K., Woody Allen is one thing. But others who could have made a claim to being wiser about their personal lives, ranging from the critic H. L. Mencken to the writer Wallace Stegner, have been just as dubious of a claim to greater insight in maturity. Mathematicians, composers, writers so often do their most creative work while young adults. And results from studies of how the ability to learn and short-term memory changes with age are certainly no comfort; abilities begin a slow and steady decline at age 20 and fall off precipitously after age 70 or 80.

But experience must shape judgments in some ways. The horror of being caught in a betrayal, the regret of having passively allowed love to slip away, these sensations burn for a lifetime. Do they simply leave people bitter when looking back, hardening prejudices without deepening the appreciation of life's traps and opportunities?

The answer, usually, is no. Wisdom is a quality that defies easy definition but psychologists who study aging have found that some of its components - judgment, emotional regulation - do improve with age in most people, consciously or not. "Of course there is a subset of people out there who are sitting in their rocking chairs, spewing hate, but my guess is that these people weren't very pleasant to begin with," said Dr. James Pennebaker, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. "The reality is that the data are fairly convincing that people as they get older become more positive and less self-absorbed."

Dr. Paul Baltes, of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, has perhaps done the most direct studies on wisdom. He has defined wisdom as "good judgment and advice about important but uncertain matters of life." His research rates a person's level of wisdom by analyzing discussions about specific crises or dilemmas.

In one, Joyce, a 60-year-old widow who has just started her own business, learns that her son is divorcing and needs her help with his two children. What to do?

In another, a friend calls to say that she has decided to commit [suicide](#). Now what?

Dr. Baltes has found that with age people generally become more adept and confident in sorting out appropriate actions in cases like these. Those aged 60 to 80 on average do significantly better than those in their 20's, especially in life-and-death matters, like knowing the risks and treatment options for someone contemplating suicide. "Wisdom" increases until middle age and plateaus there, the studies suggest.

Part of this instinct may have to do with learning from past mistakes. With increasing age and experience people tend to generate fewer approaches to solve a problem than they did when younger, research suggests. This partly reflects "the ability to repress poor pathways and combine things differently, a facility which, at least with myself, seems to have come with some age and experience," said Dr. Richard Suzman, associate director of behavioral and social research at the National Institute on Aging, in an e-mail message.

PSYCHOLOGISTS have found that people tend to think less clearly when feeling down or depressed. Here, too, age appears to offer some compensations. Dr. Laura Carstensen, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, has followed a group of almost 200 people of all ages for 10 years. They have periodically carried beepers for a week at a time, recording their emotions five times a day, each time the beeper goes off.

A striking pattern emerges: In a given day, people in their 70's report far fewer feelings of sadness, anger, and other negative emotions as do those in their 20's. This trend shows up in individuals over time as well, said Dr. Carstensen, and in part reflects an ability to temper dark emotions with humor and affection. "You allow yourself to feel some negativity without having to shut down altogether," she said. "Older people do better than middle-age people at this and middle-age people are better than young people."

This emotional blending, some psychologists now argue, is evidence of healthy mood regulation, of buffering against fears or regrets that in their purest form might be overwhelming. In studies of regret, investigators have found that elderly people often sweeten their recollections, and that this instinct is associated with good [mental health](#).

Dr. Pennebaker, the University of Texas psychologist, has shown from an analysis of writing samples from 3,000 people taken at various ages that even the number of positive words people use rises significantly over time. The rate at which people refer to themselves, a measure of rumination or self-absorption, falls off dramatically. "I will bet you 10 bucks that Woody Allen's scripts show more positive emotions now than they did at the beginning of his career," he said.

Or it may be that, as one of the country's leading neurotics, he simply does not benefit from accumulated experience the way others do, Dr. Carstensen said.

Or perhaps, at some level, Mr. Allen has not yet grown old.

Studs Terkel, who at 93 just published his 16th book, "And They All Sang," and meets everyone's definition of elderly, allowed that experience had some value. "As long as you're not senile or retarded and have some faculties left there's going to be memories you have that set a pattern for what to avoid and eliminate" in your life, he said in a phone interview.

But this will never guarantee wise behavior, he said, showing that age doesn't mellow a lifetime of political advocacy. "We certainly know there are a whole lot of old boys and old girls out there who have been voting against their best interests, the way this country is going."

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