

The secret to successful aging

July 14 2011

Whether we choose to accept or fight it, the fact is that we will all age, but will we do so successfully? Aging successfully has been linked with the "positivity effect", a biased tendency towards and preference for positive, emotionally gratifying experiences. New research published in *Biological Psychiatry* now explains how and when this effect works in the brain.

German [neuroscientists](#) studied this effect by using neuroimaging to evaluate brain engagement in young and old adults while they performed a specialized [cognitive task](#) that included supposedly irrelevant pictures of either neutral, happy, sad or fearful faces. During parts of the task when they didn't have to pay as much attention, the elderly subjects were significantly more distracted by the happy faces. When this occurred, they had increased engagement in the part of the brain that helps control emotions and this stronger signal in the brain was correlated with those who showed the greatest emotional stability.

"Integrating our findings with the assumptions of life span theories we suggest that motivational goal-shifting in healthy aging leads to a self-regulated engagement in positive emotions even when this is not required by the setting," explained author Dr. Stefanie Brassens. "In addition, our finding of a relationship between rostral [anterior cingulate cortex](#) activity and [emotional stability](#) further strengthens the hypothesis that this increased emotional control in aging enhances emotional well being."

"The lessons of healthy aging seem to be similar to those of resilience,

throughout life. As recently summarized in other work by Drs. Dennis Charney and Steven Southwick, when coping with extremely stressful life challenges, it is critical to realistically appraise the situation but also to approach it with a [positive attitude](#)," noted Dr. John H. Krystal, the Editor of [Biological Psychiatry](#).

Lifespan theories explain that positivity bias in later life reflects a greater emphasis on short-term rather than long-term priorities. The study by Dr. Brassen and colleagues now provides another clue to how the brain contributes to this age-related shift in priorities.

This makes aging successfully sound so simple – use your brain to focus on the positive.

More information: Anterior Cingulate Activation Is Related to a Positivity Bias and Emotional Stability in Successful Aging" *Biological Psychiatry*, Volume 70, Number 2 (July 1, 2011)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: The secret to successful aging (2011, July 14) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-07-secret-successful-aging.html>

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