

In older adults, fluctuating sense of control linked to cognitive ability

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Everyone has moments when they feel more in control of their lives than at other times. New research from North Carolina State University shows that this sense of control fluctuates more often, and more quickly, than previously thought – and that this sense of control may actively affect cognitive abilities.

"This is the first time we've been able to see how the day-to-day changes in our [sense](#) of being in control may actually influence the way we think," says Dr. Shevaun Neupert, an associate professor of psychology at NC State and lead author of a paper on the research.

In a study focusing on older adults, Neupert and her co-author, NC State associate professor of psychology Jason Allaire, tested each participant's sense of control every 12 hours for 60 days. In the study, participants were asked questions about whether they felt in control of their lives and whether they felt able to achieve goals they set for themselves. Cognitive functioning, such as memory and inductive reasoning, was also measured. Participants ranged in age from 61 to 87, with an average age of 74.

The study found that participants' sense of control could fluctuate significantly in the course of a single day. That is particularly interesting, given that previous research has largely focused on the presumption that one's sense of control remains relatively stable.

Researchers also found that participants who normally reported having a

low sense of control performed much better on inductive reasoning tests during periods when they reported feeling a higher sense of control. Inductive reasoning is a type of problem solving. For example, being shown a series of letters and being able to determine which letter should come next in the sequence.

Further, the researchers found that people who normally reported feeling a high sense of control scored higher on memory tests when feeling more in control than usual.

Based on modeling, researchers say it appears that the improved cognitive functioning stems from the feeling of improved control, not vice versa. "This wasn't part of the experimental design, so we can't say for sure," Neupert says. "But it is a first step toward determining which comes first – sense of control or improved cognition."

More information: The paper, "'I Think I Can, I Think I Can: Examining the Within-Person Coupling of Control Beliefs and Cognition in Older Adults," is published online by the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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