

Angry, easily frustrated young adult? Middle age may bring problems of memory and planning

March 4 2016, by Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times

In a year when anger, mistrust and frustration are driving many to the polls, new research offers some insight for the middle-aged and a warning to the young and the restless: Young adults who are readily frustrated and show high levels of hostility are more likely than their mellower peers to become 50-year-olds with problems of memory, and mental speed and agility.

In research published Wednesday, investigators used a study that examined how heart-disease risk develops to explore another feature of aging: how youthful coping styles and emotional traits affect later cognitive function. The long-term study followed 3,126 black and white men and women born on the trailing edge of the Baby Boom years (1955 to 1968) until they were well into [middle age](#), measuring their physical and emotional health as they aged.

Even after they accounted for variations in participants' socioeconomic status, negative life events, experience of discrimination and baseline mental skills, the researchers found that sunnier, easier-going [young adults](#) intellectually fared better at age 50 than did their hostile, head-banging brothers and sisters.

Late in life, researchers have had no difficulty linking hostility to cognitive impairment and dementia. But at that late stage, the authors of the current study noted that it's impossible to know which came first. By

tracking a diverse group of study participants over a long period-and by taking their cognitive measure well before old age sets in-the current study suggests that a lifetime of acting on a short fuse may do an aging mind no good.

The picture researchers gleaned was not entirely simple. The lower a 25-year-old's measured level of hostility, the better his or her cognitive function was at age 50. But a young adult's level of "effortful coping"-a response of frustration and vexation to the stresses of life-bore a more complex relationship to later cognitive performance.

The easily vexed had the poorest intellectual function at age 50. But it wasn't the most laid-back who performed best at the cusp of middle age. It was those who showed "moderate" levels of effortful coping-the group just above the most easily frustrated-who were most cognitively nimble when they reached the five-decade mark.

The researchers surmised that young adults with the most let-it-go response to frustration may not develop skills as strong as do those who respond to setbacks with clear but controlled irritation. Those given to a moderate frustration response likely develop better coping skills and more perseverance, which might in turn lead them to gut their way through more schooling and thus to climb the occupational ladder with greater success.

Indeed, researchers did find this link was strongest among the healthier, longer-schooled and more prosperous study participants.

Earlier findings from this same cohort of participants have found that high levels of hostility and "effortful coping" are linked to poorer cardiovascular health as well. The association found here to mental agility were at least as strong, if not stronger, the authors said.

Indeed, the two-cardiovascular and cognitive health-are likely closely linked. A propensity to boiling over influences the likelihood of developing such conditions as hypertension and the probability of getting it treated in a timely way, and both affect the brain's blood vessels as we age. And research has drawn a clear line between the health of the brain's vasculature-across the lifespan-and a person's cognitive health in old age.

Hostility and response to frustration are not hard to discern in young adults: distrustful, angry, and easily riled twentysomethings struggle with friends, bosses, professors and parents, not always to their own benefit.

But the researchers suggested that early adulthood-before their inclinations take a toll on their health and life prospects-might also be the best time to try "interventions that promote positive social interactions," and teach these young adults better social skills before it's too late.

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