

Mind your busyness

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Are you busy on an average day? Do you often have too many things to do to get them all done? Do you often have so many things to do that you go to bed later than your regular bedtime?

If you are over 50 and the answer to these questions is a weary yes, here is some good news: older adults with a busy daily lifestyle tend to do better on tests of cognitive function than their less busy peers, shows a new study in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*. The research is part of the

Dallas Lifespan Brain Study, one of the most comprehensive studies of age-related changes in cognition and brain function in healthy adults currently underway in the USA.

"We show that people who report greater levels of daily busyness tend to have better cognition, especially with regard to memory for recently learned information," says Sara Festini, a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Vital Longevity of the University of Texas at Dallas and lead author of the study.

"We were surprised at how little research there was on busyness, given that being too busy seems to be a fact of modern life for so many," says Denise Park, University Distinguished Chair at the Center for Vital Longevity, Director of the Dallas Lifespan Brain Study.

The researchers surveyed 330 participants in the Dallas Lifespan Brain Study - healthy women and men between 50 and 89 from the Dallas/Fort Worth area, Texas, recruited through media advertisements and community notices— about their daily schedule. The participants also visited the Park Aging Mind laboratory at the Center for Vital Longevity, where they took part in a long series of neuropsychological tests to measure their cognitive performance.

The results show that at any age, and regardless of education, a busier lifestyle is associated with superior processing speed of the brain, working memory, reasoning, and vocabulary. Especially strong is the association between busyness and better episodic memory, the ability to remember specific events in the past.

Festini et al. warn that the present data do not allow the conclusion that being busy directly improves cognition. It is also possible that people with better cognitive function seek out a busier lifestyle, or that busyness and cognition reinforce each other, resulting in reciprocal strengthening.

But one mediating factor accounting for the relationship might be new learning, propose the researchers. Busy people are likely to have more opportunities to learn as they are exposed to more information and encounter a wider range of situations in daily life. In turn, learning is known to stimulate cognition: for example, a recent study from the Center for Vital Longevity found that a sustained effort in learning difficult new skills, such as digital photography or quilting, boosts episodic memory.

"Living a busy lifestyle appears beneficial for mental function, although additional experimental work is needed to determine if manipulations of busyness have the same effect," says Festini.

More information: The busier the better: greater busyness is associated with better cognition, *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, Festini SB, McDonough IM and Park DC, [DOI: 10.3389/fnagi.2016.00098](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnagi.2016.00098)

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