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Age-Old Advice

With fewer inhibitions, elderly adults provide the best advice in thorny situations, according to new study

CHICAGO, Sept. 13 /PRNewswire/ -- Sometimes elderly advice is the best advice, according to a new study from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. The research finds a silver lining to the negative effects of aging—older adults' declining ability to control their responses allows them to provide a greater quantity and quality of advice when it comes to uncomfortable social situations. This is the first study to show that age-related declines in executive function lead to these positive behavioral effects, leading to significantly greater potential for prompting lifestyle changes among advice recipients.

"Everyone at one point or another has witnessed a grandparent or an older adult bluntly comment on someone's appearance while others refrain from saying anything," said Evan Apfelbaum, visiting assistant professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School and lead author. "We explored the psychological basis for this sort of anecdotal experience and have identified some remarkable positive implications of these naturally-occurring declines in older adults' ability to suppress behavior."

Apfelbaum and his co-authors examined age-related declines in executive function—the mental capacity to control one's responses—among elderly adults (with an average age of 73 years old). While most people remain guarded when discussing sensitive topics in public, the researchers found that this age-related decline prompts the opposite approach and proves itself to be beneficial in social contexts.

"Aging is often associated with a host of negative consequences, including issues with memory, attention, and decision-making," Apfelbaum said. "However, age-related declines in the capacity to control behavior can serve as an ice-breaker, fostering greater engagement and comfort in typically stressful social exchanges. It appears that these older adults are able to give better advice in these thorny situations because others are more concerned with being offensive than being helpful."

To test this theory, the researchers designed a task in which participants volunteered in a "community-based interview initiative to counsel struggling teenagers." This experiment included 19 college-age adults and 32 elderly adults. Half of the older adults demonstrated relatively high levels of executive function (comparable to the healthy young adults) and the other half of the older adults demonstrated relatively low levels of executive

function. All participants received a photograph of a visibly overweight female and a fictional letter in which she pleaded for help regarding her struggles. The teenager complained of a lack of energy, decreased social engagement, abnormal sleeping patterns and a lack of interest in school—symptoms often associated with childhood obesity. After reviewing the case, the participants were asked to offer advice to the teen and were video recorded.

The researchers discovered that only 32 percent of the college-age adults and 44 percent of the older adults with higher levels of executive function explicitly mentioned weight as a potential source of the teen's problems. However, 80 percent of the older adults with lower levels of executive function explicitly mentioned weight.

"Although the older adults possessing higher executive function and college-age adults recognized the teenager's serious health threat, they tended not to share their concerns," added Apfelbaum.

Another major finding is the impact of the advice given by the older adults. The researchers asked doctors specializing in obesity treatment to blindly evaluate the advice generated by all participants. These doctors rated the advice provided by older adults with lower executive function as having significantly greater potential to prompt a lifestyle change compared to the other participants.

The study, "Age-related Decline in Executive Function Predicts Better Advice-Giving in Uncomfortable Social Contexts," will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Apfelbaum co-authored the research with Anne C. Krendl and Nalini Ambady of Tufts University.

MORE INFORMATION: To request the full study or to arrange an interview with Professor Evan Apfelbaum, contact Aaron Mays at the contact information listed below.

For more information about the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, visit <http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu>.

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