

HEALTH

The surprising way to prevent memory loss — according to top psychologists

Researchers have proved for the first time how adopting a positive attitude could help us avoid or even reverse age-related forgetfulness



“Hope was the healthiest and best way to spark success and promote long-term happiness,” says professor Reinhard Pekrun

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Peta Bee

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Sixty is the new forty, and by seventy you could be having the time of your life. Believe these mantras to be true and you will likely ward off mild cognitive impairment (MCI) far more effectively than friends and family who become grumpier and more cantankerous the older they get.

It certainly seems to be working for 96-year-old David Attenborough, who said last year that “focus and curiosity” help him to stay clear-minded; and for Helen Mirren, 77, who prefers the phrase “growing up” instead of “ageing” as “you literally get to be wiser”. Now, researchers at Yale School of Public Health have proved for the first time how adopting a positive attitude could help us avoid or even reverse age-related memory loss and restore cognitive ability to normal.

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Forgetting the names of people and places, misplacing things and failing to remember appointments are all common symptoms of age-related MCI which, according to the charity Age UK, is estimated to affect up to 20 per cent of the older population, or about 2 million people in the UK. “Most people assume there is no recovery from MCI, but in fact, half of those who have it do recover,” says Becca Levy, a professor in public health and psychology at Yale and lead author of the new study. “Little is known about why some recover while others don’t.”

To find out if an optimistic outlook on ageing has any effect, she and her team recruited 1,716 people in their seventies who were enrolled in the US health and retirement study, some of whom were diagnosed with MCI and others who had normal cognition when the study started. Participants were tracked for 12 years and [results](#), published in JAMA Network Open journal, showed that those with a cheery disposition had a 30.2 per cent greater likelihood of recovering from memory impairment than those with negative beliefs. A positive outlook also meant people recovered their cognition up to two years faster than the grumpy cohort, and Levy says that “age-belief interventions could increase the number of people who experience cognitive recovery”.

The new findings add to a slew of evidence about the power of positivity on healthy ageing for mind and body. Three years ago, psychologists from Northwestern University [reported](#) that, of 991 middle-aged and older people, those who were mostly enthusiastic about the future performed better in memory tests as they got older. Others have shown that optimistic adults have better blood sugar control and healthier cholesterol levels,

adding up to improved cardiovascular health, and that a habitually positive outlook on life can help to minimise chronic pain and the emotional distress associated with it.

Last month a [study](#) of more than 1,000 younger adults in Britain, Germany, the US and Canada revealed that dark feelings are more likely linked with poor health, including symptoms such as stress-related headaches, nausea, back pain, and insomnia. Reinhard Pekrun, a professor of psychology at the University of Essex who led the investigation, says his findings also showed that if two people of equal cognitive ability took a test, the more positive-minded individual would achieve a grade higher than someone with a negative mindset, suggesting negativity affects cognitive performance, too. “Overall, hope was the healthiest and best way to spark success and promote long-term happiness,” Pekrun says.

If you are prone to pessimism, you will also be accumulating stress. “Over time, being negative and self-critical means your body will begin to shut down to protect itself, becoming slower and more susceptible to health conditions such as depression, anxiety and sleep problems,” Julian Hannan, a chartered psychologist, says. The good news is that you can train yourself to become a more positive person. “Research shows that starting to give ourselves a bit of compassion and speaking more kindly to ourselves is the first step out of negative thinking,” Hannan says. “When we do this more often the body starts to release more feelgood oxytocin and lower levels of damaging stress hormones such as cortisol.”

Jennifer Wild, an associate professor in experimental psychology at the University of Oxford, says if we focus on the positive rather than the negative in everyday scenarios it will rub off long term. For example, when a friend comments that you look different, assume they mean you look well, not wrinkled, old and past it. “Learning to create a positive interpretation for lots of different scenarios extends into our everyday life,” she says. “It raises mood and lead us to interpret other things more positively, which will ultimately help us to thrive.”