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10 Ways You Get Smarter as You Get Older

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It's true that as you get older, your brain's processing speed begins to slow, and your memory may occasionally short out, says Margaret Gatz, PhD, professor of psychology, gerontology, and preventive medicine at the University of Southern California. But researchers have recently made some surprising discoveries about what's really happening in our heads as we age: "We are identifying ways in which older minds hold their own against younger ones and even surpass them," Gatz says. Here, 10 ways you get smarter as you go.

1. Your hemispheres sync up.

The brain is divided into two hemispheres, with each side specializing in different operations. Brain scans show that while young people often use only one side for a specific task, middle-aged and older adults are more likely to activate both hemispheres at once—a pattern known as bilateralization. By involving both sides, older people bring the full spectrum of the brain's power to bear, allowing them to make more fruitful connections among the disparate parts of a problem or situation.

2. Your brain never stops growing.

Scientists once believed that some of our brain cells died off when we got older. But it's now clear that we not only hang on to our neurons—we grow new ones, too. Throughout a person's lifetime, the brain is continually reshaping itself in response to what it learns. Even something as silly as a clown trick can alter its structure: In a study published in *The Journal of Neuroscience*, German researcher Janina Boyke and her colleagues taught 60-year-old adults how to juggle. Afterward, scans of the subjects' brains showed growth in a gray-matter region that processes complex visual information. In another experiment, Swiss neuroscientist Lutz Jäncke studied people who were learning to play a musical instrument. After they had been practicing for five months, Jäncke noted significant changes in the regions of the brain that control hearing, memory, and hand movements, even in participants who were 65 or older.

3. Your reasoning and problem-solving skills get sharper.

This is evident not only in laboratory studies but also in examinations of choices made in real life. For example, according to a study prepared for the Brookings Institute by Sumit Agarwal, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, the middle-aged **make smarter money decisions** than their younger counterparts. In particular, they are better at financial transactions like managing their credit card balance and avoiding excess interest rate and fee payments—with the best performance notched by those in their early 50s.

4. You can focus on the upside.

Our outlook grows rosier as we get older, as demonstrated by a study published last year in the journal *Psychology and Aging*. Laura Carstensen, a professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, asked a group of subjects ages 18 to 94 to record their emotional states at five randomly chosen times each day for a one-week period. She repeated the procedure with the same participants five years later, and then again five years after that. With the passage of time, the study subjects reported **more positive well-being** and greater emotional stability. That may have been partly due to changes in how the brain—in particular, the emotion-processing center known as the amygdala—responds to positive and negative events. In a 2004 study, Carstensen scanned the brains of younger and older volunteers as they looked at cheerful, distressing, and neutral photographs. The amygdalae of younger subjects (ages 18 to 29) were activated equally by both the cheerful and distressing images, while the brains of the older subjects (between 70 and 90 years old) reacted much more strongly to the positive pictures.

5. Your people skills are constantly improving.

Mature adults understand themselves well—and they also understand other people, research shows. In a study published in the *Journal of Gerontology* in 2007, older and younger adults were presented with a series of hypothetical everyday problems (say, for example, an emotionally needy relative calls to talk just as you're leaving to meet up with friends, or you've won a free vacation, but the travel dates would mean missing a long-planned family party). The older adults were especially good at solving such **interpersonal dilemmas**—often by choosing a path that skirted direct conflict. "As we get older, our social intelligence keeps expanding," explains Gatz. "We get better at sizing up people, at understanding how relationships work—and at not getting into an argument unless we mean to."

6. Your priorities become clearer.

"Studies of the way adults perceive time suggest that we become increasingly aware that our years on this Earth are limited," notes Michael Marsiske, PhD, an associate professor of clinical and health psychology at the University of Florida and an expert on aging. "This awareness helps explain the choices that older adults tend to make: to spend time with a smaller, tighter circle of friends and family, to pay more attention to good news than to bad news, and to seek out positive encounters and avoid negative ones."

7. You're always adding to your knowledge and abilities.

There are some kinds of information we learn and never forget. Take vocabulary: Studies show that we keep

adding new words to our repertoire as we age, giving us ever richer and more subtle ways to express ourselves. Job-related knowledge also continues to accumulate, meaning we keep getting better and better at what we do.

8. You can see the big picture.

As we age, we're better able to take the measure of a situation. An experiment published in the journal *Neuron* in 2005 provided a very literal demonstration of this ability: Psychologist Allison Sekuler, PhD, of McMaster University in Canada, presented younger and older subjects with computer screens showing moving images of varying shapes and shades. When the shapes were small and gray, younger people were able to point them out more quickly. But when they were large and high contrast, older individuals performed the task faster. Sekuler notes that young brains seem to be better at focusing on details to the exclusion of their surroundings, and more mature brains are able to take in the whole scene.

9. You gain control of your emotions.

While young people ride a roller coaster of happiness and sadness, excitement and disappointment, older adults are able to maintain a more even keel. In a study published in 2009, psychologist Vasiliki Orgeta, PhD, evaluated younger and older adults and concluded that older adults (between ages 61 and 81) had more clarity about their feelings, made better use of strategies to regulate their emotions, and had a higher degree of control over their emotional impulses.

10. You become an instant expert, even in new situations.

As the brain encounters new experiences, it develops schemas—mental frameworks that allow us to recognize and respond to similar circumstances when we come upon them again. By midlife we've accumulated a stockpile of schemas that help give us our bearings even in novel situations. We just know what to do—and this sense of effortless mastery flows from the reservoir of experience we've built up over time. In fact, we have a name for this ability to draw on deep knowledge of the past while accommodating what comes up in the present: It's called wisdom.

Annie Murphy Paul's latest book is *Origins: How the Nine Months Before Birth Shape the Rest of Our Lives* (Free Press).

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