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Press Release

Psychology Study: You can teach an old dog new tricks

Younger and older adults alike are able to adopt new socio-emotional behaviors. Even older adults benefit from a personality intervention aimed at handling stress and challenging social situations better. This is the conclusion of a psychological aging research study conducted by researchers from Germany and Switzerland led by Prof. Dr Cornelia Wrzus (Heidelberg University) and Prof. Dr Corina Aguilar-Raab (University of Mannheim).

Participants in the current study attended weekly training sessions and completed assignments for everyday life on how to better handle stress and deal with challenging social situations. 165 subjects – young adults mainly in their twenties and older adults between 60 and 80 – took part in the eight-week in-person training course. The researchers from Heidelberg, Mannheim, Hamburg, and Zurich (Switzerland) used a multi-method approach to examine the effects of the intervention program. Before, during, and after the training and for up to a year after the program ended, the effects of the intervention on emotional stability and extraversion were measured based on questionnaires and an indirect computer-based test.

The analysis shows that the average change in these socio-emotional behaviors and personality traits barely differed in the two age groups. For the researchers, one “striking and unexpected result, since it seems more difficult for older adults to learn something new, like a foreign language or a musical instrument,” reports study author Wrzus. The study also tested one possible explanation: during the study participants were asked how intensively they practiced their tasks. The result: older participants delved more deeply into the training materials and weekly assignments, i.e., demonstrated slightly greater engagement.

“Our study results somewhat contradict the adage that ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’. That is good news for aging populations. When people are sufficiently motivated, they maintain the ability to change and learn new things,” stresses Cornelia Wrzus. In addition to Prof. Wrzus and Prof. Aguilar-Raab, Gabriela Kuchler (Heidelberg University), Kira Borgdorf (University of Mannheim), Prof. Dr Wiebke Bleidorn (University of Zurich) and Prof. Dr Jenny Wagner (University of Hamburg) contributed to the research.

The German Research Foundation funded the work. The results of the study were published in the journal “Communications Psychology”.

Original publication:

G. Kuchler, K.S.A. Borgdorf, C. Aguilar-Raab, W. Bleidorn, J. Wagner & C. Wrzus: Personality intervention affects emotional stability and extraversion similarly in older and younger adults. *Communications Psychology* 3, 171 (published online 25 November 2025): <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44271-025-00350-2>

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