

# Brain atrophy in elderly leads to unintended racism, depression, and problem gambling

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As we age, our brains slowly shrink in volume and weight. This includes significant atrophy within the frontal lobes, the seat of executive functioning. Executive functions include planning, controlling, and inhibiting thought and behavior. In the aging population, an inability to inhibit unwanted thoughts and behavior causes several social behaviors and cognitions to go awry.

In a study appearing in the October issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, University of Queensland psychologist, Bill von Hippel, reports that decreased inhibitory ability in late adulthood can lead to unintended prejudice, social inappropriateness, depression, and gambling problems.

Regarding prejudice, von Hippel and colleagues found that older white adults showed greater stereotyping toward African Americans than younger white adults did, despite being more motivated to control their prejudices. Von Hippel suggests that “because prejudice toward African Americans conflicts with prevailing egalitarian beliefs, older adults attempt to inhibit their racist feelings, but fail.”

Age-related inhibitory losses have also been implicated in social appropriateness. Von Hippel found that older adults were more likely than younger adults were to inquire about private issues (e.g. weight gain, family problems) in public settings. Furthermore, these age differences emerged even though older and younger adults both agreed that it is inappropriate to inquire about such issues in public settings. The older adults seemed to know the social rules but failed to follow them, which is consistent with diminished frontal lobe functioning.

In late-onset depressed older adults, poor inhibition predicted increased rumination, which in turn predicted increased depression. This finding suggests that people who struggle to control their rumination begin to lose that battle as they age, with the end result being the emergence of depression late in life.

Von Hippel also found that a penchant for gambling can be toxic for older adults, as those with poor executive functioning are particularly likely to have gambling problems. Interestingly, these problems are exacerbated in the afternoon, when older adults are less mentally alert. Older adults were more likely to get into an unnecessary argument and were also more likely to gamble all their money away later rather than earlier in the day. These findings suggest a possible avenue for intervention, by scheduling their important social activities or gambling excursions earlier in the day.

While social changes commonly occur with age, they are widely assumed a function of changes in preferences and values as people get older. Von Hippel argues that there may be more to the story and that some of the changes may be unintended and brought about by losses in executive control.