

The Science of Older and Wiser

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The New York Times:

Since ancient times, the elusive concept of wisdom has figured prominently in philosophical and religious texts. The question remains compelling: What is wisdom, and how does it play out in individual lives? Most psychologists agree that if you define wisdom as maintaining positive well-being and kindness in the face of challenges, it is one of the most important qualities one can possess to age successfully — and to face physical decline and death.

Vivian Clayton, a geriatric neuropsychologist in Orinda, Calif., developed a definition of wisdom in the 1970s, when she was a graduate student, that has served as a foundation for research on the subject ever since. After scouring ancient texts for evocations of wisdom, she found that most people described as wise were decision makers. So she asked a group of law students, law professors and retired judges to name the characteristics of a wise person. Based on an analysis of their answers, she determined that wisdom consists of three key components: cognition, reflection and compassion.

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The Berlin Wisdom Project, a research effort begun in the 1980s that sought to define wisdom by studying ancient and modern texts, called it “an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.” A co-founder of the project, Ursula M. Staudinger, went on to distinguish between general wisdom, the kind that involves understanding life from an observer’s point of view (for example, as an advice giver), and personal wisdom, which involves deep insight into one’s own life.

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“There’s evidence that people who rank high in neuroticism are unlikely to be wise,” said Laura L. Carstensen, a psychology professor and founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity in California. “They see things in a self-centered and negative way and so they fail to benefit emotionally from experience, even though they may be very intelligent.”

Read the whole story: [*The New York Times*](#).