

Memory and Successful Aging: A Conversation with Coach John Wooden

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A few months ago, just before his 98th birthday, I had the unique opportunity to interview John Wooden in his home in Encino, CA, about memory and successful aging. Wooden is the legendary former UCLA basketball coach and educator (1948-1975), is in the Basketball Hall of Fame as both a player and a coach, and in 2003, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Successful aging can be an elusive process both in terms of definition and practice. As psychologists, we typically collect and examine data and attempt to draw conclusions based on large samples. However, one can also learn a lot by talking to older adults about their memory and life experiences. This is especially true when talking to a humble and energetic 97-year-old man from the Midwest, who feels that he has been blessed with a wonderful wife, 2 children, 7 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren — and that's not to mention 10 national collegiate basketball championships.

Many books have been devoted to the life of John Wooden (see Wooden & Jamison, 2005, Wooden & Tobin, 2004), so the purpose of my interview was to talk to Coach (as he is still known) more specifically about memory and aging. As a cognitive psychologist who studies these topics, this was an opportunity I had been looking forward to ever since coming to UCLA. Although I had never conducted research by interviewing single “case studies,” I thought someone who was a legendary coach for such a long period might also provide important insight regarding successful aging.

Strategies and Tests of Memory

When asked about his memory, Coach Wooden clearly acknowledged that his is not great, and is much worse than it was 30 years ago. He said (like many older adults) he often struggles to remember information he just recently heard or read and that he has trouble remembering names of people he has just met. When I asked him what strategies he uses to remember such information as a person's name, he said he would usually ask the person to repeat their name, to ensure that he has heard it correctly, as he notes that his eyesight and hearing aren't what they used to be. In fact, his answering machine asks that you speak slowly and distinctly. And if he really wants to remember something that he thinks he might forget, he keeps it simple: “I'll say it a few times to myself, then I'll write it down before I forget.” He noted that in order to memorize poetry (something that he still does today), he will write out the poem many times, allowing him to better focus on the precise words that lead to visual images.

When I explained to Coach how cognitive psychologists use various tasks to attempt to measure memory, Coach was game to try a few. He had no problem repeating digits back to me that he recently heard (a short-term memory test). Not to my surprise, he did very well compared to what would be expected for his age group when I read him a list of words to recall later, and he used verbal rehearsal (my terminology) by immediately repeating the words out loud and then repeating them to himself to remember the items. When a second list contained some partly basketball-related terms (e.g., hoop,

score, press, key, trap), he said he “associated them with the game,” which allowed him to remember more of the words than he did on the first list, but he also recalled a few that were related to the studied words from this list but were not actually on list, a result that is highly consistent with theories of aging, memory and expertise (Castel, McCabe, Roediger, & Heitman, 2007; Gallo, 2006). Of course, for proper comparison, a control group of other 97-year-olds who had not won 10 NCAA championships was not immediately available!

To examine his memory for semantic information, I asked Coach various questions about the technical aspects of basketball — after all, he wrote a textbook on the subject. He did not hesitate when asked about dimensions of the basketball court, shot clock duration, and other details and rules (including recent changes and debates about the game). In addition, he enjoyed recalling related memories that were associated with these cues, and his knowledge of the game and other current events was astounding, suggesting that wisdom and experience has a close connection to memory, especially in old age (see also Helmuth, 2003). Thus, the memories of this or any other 97-year-old are not fully captured by measuring his ability to remember digits, word lists, or facts about basketball. His memories, like those of many older adults, are often valued, emotional, autobiographically rich accounts of important life events, many of them exceptional in nature, and clearly ones that he cherishes.

As much as I wanted to talk to Coach about memory and aging, it was hard not to delve into other domains, such as family, politics, poetry, and of course, basketball. Coach vividly recalled important events that “influenced society,” such as his involvement in bringing racial equality to college basketball. He was proud to note that his 1948 Indiana State team included Clarence Walker, the first black player permitted to play in the national collegiate tournament. When asked about some of his favorite memories, he responded: “The games and championships of course, were so memorable, as were the events leading up to them, but there are other things that I think are even more meaningful.” These more emotional memories were mostly related to his wife and their time spent together. Nellie Wooden died of cancer in 1985; after 53 years of marriage, John still writes her a letter every month.

Successful Aging

According to theorists Rowe and Kahn (1998), successful aging can be defined as a combination of several key elements. These include an absence of diseases and disabilities; dealing with changes in control, bereavement, and social support; maintaining high levels of physical and cognitive abilities; and preserving social and productive activities. From a more behaviorist perspective, toward the end of his career and well into old age himself, B.F. Skinner wrote a book on how to enjoy old age (Skinner & Vaughan, 1983). Although he outlined many limiting factors associated with aging, he focused on the many positive aspects of aging and the need to selectively focus on certain goals (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990), as well as the need to have an optimistic perspective regarding life and development,

In many ways, John Wooden fits this template of successful aging, having often dealt with challenges in seemingly adaptive and simple ways: he has chosen not to relocate or redecorate his humble two-bedroom condominium since his wife passed away over 20 years ago. Despite a recent fall, he still remains active (and attends many UCLA basketball and football games, as well as gymnastics events), and most importantly, he maintains daily contact with his large family, all of whom live within an hour drive. In addition, his friends and family frequently visit, take him out for lunch or accompany him to medical appointments, and keep his phone line and answering machine very active. He took pleasure in

showing me the handwritten appointment calendar that he maintains, which keeps him busy with lunch and dinner outings, physical therapy visits, family events, keynote addresses at major events, and more casual meetings with former UCLA players, who frequently stop by to say hello.

Although many describe him as a legend, one of his greatest fans described him this way: “Grandpa is a great rhymers.” In addition to his many accomplishments as an educator and basketball coach, John Wooden has been reading, writing, and reciting poetry for over 80 years. Coach’s lifelong link to poetry also plays a big role in his cognitive vitality. He memorizes new poems and retrieves poems he learned over 80 years ago. It also allows him to relax, as he often recites poetry before he falls asleep. Coach has published many of his own poems and books, and he has also authored several colorful and creative children’s books. He is currently working on a collection of one hundred poems that he says he is writing solely for his family and not for publication.

Research has shown that creative pursuits are influenced by age. Lehman (1953) outlined how production of superior lyrical poetry and music typically shows a peak between the ages of 25 to 29, but also again at the age range of 80 to 84. Ninety-seven year old John Wooden will perhaps contribute now to an even later age range. After all, as Skinner noted, Michelangelo lived to be 89 and was painting to the end. More recently, Nora Oches recently became the oldest person ever to finish college when, at age 95, she completed a degree in history and graduated on the same day as her 21-year-old granddaughter, demonstrating that perhaps the key to enjoying old age is engaging in active pursuits in any domain and having family and friends around to help you enjoy it.

Staying Positive

Mather and Carstensen (2005) discuss the positivity effect in older adults, in which healthy aging is accompanied by focusing on positive information and emotions. It was hard not to sense an enormous amount of positivity in the room when talking to Coach about his memories and his outlook on life (and death). He frequently discussed how grateful he is to have been blessed with a family and good fortune in terms of basketball success. He feels lucky to have been able to keep in touch with loved ones, both family and former players, and he doesn’t fear death, as that is when he feels he will be reunited with his late wife.

When asked more directly about the keys to successful aging, Coach was quick to respond: stay busy, stay active, enjoy every day like it is your masterpiece, have some variety, and try to learn something new every day. Although poetry composition has often kept him busy, he also reads biographies of such figures as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Winston Churchill, and many works about Abraham Lincoln, one of his favorite political figures. One of Coach’s famous quotes, “When I am through learning, then I am through,” illustrates his lifelong commitment to education and learning for his players, himself, and his family. As a proud grandfather, he hangs old report cards from his grandchildren on the walls and enthusiastically talks about various great-grandchildren who are pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Coach is a firm believer in the benefits of both physical and mental preparation for basketball games. During his coaching days at UCLA, he regularly walked a brisk five miles a day at the track in the early morning, using this time to reflect on previous and upcoming practices and games. In addition, he found this was a useful time for him to relax. He also attended some psychology classes — not for credit but to

help him better understand how to interact with his younger players. Although around that time, he also said he realized perhaps he should be attending psychiatry classes as well!

In summary, and trying to tie observations about Coach Wooden with current research in cognitive aging, it was clear that Coach was aware of the memory challenges that come with aging, and he showed intact levels of metacognition in most cases. He maintained his ability to selectively use certain strategies at appropriate times in order to supplement impairments in memory, eyesight, and hearing (a form of selective optimization with compensation, Baltes & Baltes, 1990). In addition, he focused on remembering information he felt was important (Castel, 2007), and this typically consisted of events related to family or emotional cues.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint ways to engage in successful aging, this combination of strong commitment to cognitive activity and positivity seems especially important. Coach summarized this by saying, near the end of the interview, “I am a happy and grateful man, and I remember the things that matter to me, but sometimes it is a challenge.” At the end of the interview, with Coach not at all tiring and eyeing what was next on his agenda, he insisted on walking me to the door and even invited me back again, displaying his characteristic politeness and sincerity. As I left, I felt more like I had visited a wise older relative rather than a world-famous basketball coach who is an iconic legend.

End Note: Thinking Broadly About Memory

Research in memory and cognitive aging typically involves collecting data from groups of older adults, ideally in a long-itudinal manner, so a case study of John Wooden might not accurately capture how memory changes in old age more generally. However, this interview (as well as other interactions I have had with older adults) reminded me of the need to think of research on memory and aging in a broader context (Hess, 2005) and to sometimes emphasize case studies of people who demonstrate successful aging (Jeste, 2005), even if it might be simply for some inspiration. Coach’s memory was by no means astounding, and by his own assessment it has changed considerably over the years. However, many other factors influence his memory and cognitive function: His personality, positivity, wisdom and attitude towards aging play important roles in his cognitive vitality — often things that are overlooked when studying specific memory mechanisms. Although I had not uncovered any hidden secrets of successful aging, Coach Wooden provided me with optimism and many important reminders about how to think about successful aging.