

New Opportunities in Aging Research

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As a coping mechanism, dwelling on life's daily struggles can end up causing more harm than good. But the good news is, we do less of it as we get older.

It's called "rumination," and essentially means that "when you're upset you become passive and have a lot of thoughts without actually doing something," said Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, a psychologist from Yale University in a symposium at the APS 17th Annual Convention in Los Angeles.

Titled "Opportunities in Aging Research: New Issues and New Directions," one purpose of the symposium, which was co-sponsored by the National Institute on Aging, was to encourage behavioral researchers not currently working in the area of aging to think of their own work through the lens of aging and life-span. This is part of NIA's effort to attract behavioral researchers to its mission and increase its support of behavioral science research.

For Nolen-Hoeksema, her research revealed a number of things about the way ruminators think about the world, such as the fact that it impairs problem-solving "which is ironic because people say they enter into rumination to solve their problems," she said.

Nolen-Hoeksema examined the prevalence of the self-focused coping mechanism across the age spectrum.

After conducting work with the Bereavement Coping Project and finding that people who scored highest in rumination were much more likely to qualify for major depression. She and her research team decided to administer community surveys. What they found was that there was a significant reduction in rumination and depression with age.

"We asked a young adult if they ever sit around and think about all the things that are going wrong in their life. They said 'yeah, all the time.' When we asked an older adult they said 'no, that wouldn't be a very healthy thing to do, now would it,'" Nolen-Hoeksema said.

These findings led Nolen-Hoeksema to ask questions about the correlation between the self-focused coping mechanism and physical health.

Such questions can be the beginning of promising lines of study and the panel strongly urged those in attendance that pursuing research in aging is sometimes simply a matter of taking what you already have and extending it into the field of aging.

The researchers also emphasized interdisciplinary collaboration because it allows a broader spectrum of data and ideas, particularly in aging and life-span which are already broad and encompassing topics.

Another panelist presented work her lab had done on undergraduates at the school, and talked about how she planned to follow up on the research by studying older age groups.

Jeanne Tsai, a researcher at Stanford, focused the audience's attention on culture, what people do to feel good and how people say they would like to feel.

In particular, her lab's research had shown that people generally want to feel better than they actually do, a surprising revelation in affect valuation theory.

"Our culture ideals shape how we would like to feel, maybe more than we do," Tsai said.

But what was of even more interest was the difference in affect valuation that the team found across cultural groups.

Tsai and her team realized that in individual contexts (found primarily in American societies) a high value was placed on an active type of pleasure, whereas in collective contexts (found primarily in Chinese societies), a higher value was placed on calm pleasures, meaning that American undergraduates valued excitement more and their Chinese counterparts valued serenity more.

"We did all this with college students, but how does it affect non-college students?" and "do people become better at attaining their ideal status with age?" are questions that Tsai and her team are now currently examining.

Other researchers at the symposium discussed such issues as how psychological well-being is contoured by age and how the integration of research in genetics and social environment can promote good health and prevent disease in old age.

For further information about opportunities at the National Institute on Aging visit them online at: www.nia.nih.gov.