It's smart to be older and wiser, doctors discover

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It feels like the beginning of the end. You can't programme your video; you forget your own telephone number; then you can't remember why you got up from the TV to walk into the kitchen.

These are senior moments and they are supposed to signify one thing: the onset of senility, the downward slide into incoherence and loss of mental function.

Or at least that is what scientists used to think until recent studies revealed evidence that old age is by no means a guarantee of mental degeneration.

Indeed, many attributes survive intact into our eighties, it seems. Some even improve. 'There has been a complete rethink about old people's cognitive prowess,' said Molly Wagster of the US National Institute of Ageing.

'Social, verbal and personal judgments - many actually improve with age and there is a good name for this: it's called wisdom. A lot of older people have it and we may do well to study such individuals to see how they can help younger people.'

This point was also stressed in the journal Science, which devoted an entire recent issue to ageing and concluded, in an editorial, 'Wisdom of the Wizened', that contrary to assumptions 'the old actually have a lot to teach the young'.

In the past, old age was assumed to bring only loss of faculties. Reaction times, visual acuity and memory were found to decline from middle age onwards.

'But that merely reflected what we were looking for,' said Dr Thomas Hess, of North Carolina State University. 'We were looking at problem areas, at abnormal brain states, because we were interested in understanding illnesses like Alzheimer's. Now we have started to look at what happens in normal brain function and the position looks less gloomy.'

In one experiment carried out by Hess, groups of older and younger people were given a list of behaviours displayed by fictional individuals and asked to judge these characters for honesty and intelligence. The older group turned out to be much better at accurately labelling people as dishonest or bright.

In another experiment, old and young people were asked to create stories on various themes. These were then transcribed and read out to judges who were unaware of the original authors' ages. Again older people come out on top - as better storytellers.

'One theory put forward for our species' success is based on simple longevity,' added Wagster. 'Octogenarians could remember what to do when during a drought because they remembered similar crises decades earlier. They could help their tribe by telling them, in a dramatic way, what to do.'

Even in cases where scientists had previously discovered a decline in a faculty - for example, memory - new studies have shown this degeneration was far less clear-cut than had been realised. When presented with stories about people's life experiences, older people are usually poor at remembering details, for example.

However, when psychologists presented older people with tales that mirrored their own experiences - for instance, with stories of retirement homes - they proved just as adept at remembering as young people. 'It's quite simple,' said Hess. 'Older people just get more selective about the things they want to remember.'

It may still take longer to acquire new skills - like understanding your DVD player - but there are compensations: older people are generally happier and have better mental health. It won't help you to remember why you walked into the kitchen, of course. But you should feel happier when you get there.

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