

# Example of essay on the science of older and wiser; new york times

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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.

## **Photo**

INFLUENTIAL Joan and Erik Erikson devised a theory on human development.

Credit The New York Times

Unfortunately, research shows that cognitive functioning slows as people age. But speed isn't everything. A recent study in *Topics in Cognitive Science* pointed out that older people have much more information in their brains than younger ones, so retrieving it naturally takes longer. And the quality of the information in the older brain is more nuanced. While younger people were faster in tests of cognitive performance, older people showed “ greater

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sensitivity to fine-grained differences,” the study found.

It stands to reason that the more information people have in their brains, the more they can detect familiar patterns. Elkhonon Goldberg, a neuroscientist in New York and author of “ The Wisdom Paradox,” says that “ cognitive templates” develop in the older brain based on pattern recognition, and that these can form the basis for wise behavior and decisions.

According to Dr. Clayton, one must take time to gain insights and perspectives from one’s cognitive knowledge to be wise (the reflective dimension). Then one can use those insights to understand and help others (the compassionate dimension).

Working from Dr. Clayton’s framework, Monika Ardelt, an associate sociology professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville, felt a need to expand on studies of old age because of research showing that satisfaction late in life consists of things like maintaining physical and mental health, volunteering and having positive relationships with others. But this isn’t always possible if the body breaks down, if social roles are diminished and if people suffer major losses. “ So these people cannot age successfully? They have to give up?” she recalled asking herself.

Wisdom, she has found, is the ace in the hole that can help even severely impaired people find meaning, contentment and acceptance in later life.

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She developed a scale consisting of 39 questions aimed at measuring three dimensions of wisdom. People responding to statements on Professor Ardelt’s wisdom scale — things like “ a problem has little attraction for me if I

don't think it has a solution," or " I can be comfortable with all kinds of people" and " I'm easily irritated by people who argue with me" — were not told they were being measured for wisdom. Respondents later answered questions about hypothetical challenges and crises, and those who showed evidence of high wisdom were also more likely to have better coping skills, Professor Ardel found. In general, for example, they said they would be more active than passive about dealing with hardship.

An impediment to wisdom is thinking, " I can't stand who I am now because I'm not who I used to be," said Isabella S. Bick, a psychotherapist who, at 81, still practices part time out of her home in Sharon, Conn. She has aging clients who are upset by a perceived worsening of their looks, their sexual performance, their physical abilities, their memory. For them, as for herself, an acceptance of aging is necessary for growth, but " it's not a resigned acceptance; it's an embracing acceptance," she said.

" Wise people are able to accept reality as it is, with equanimity," Professor Ardel said. Her research shows that when people in nursing homes or with a terminal illness score high on her wisdom scale, they also report a greater sense of well-being. " If things are really bad, it's good to be wise," she said. 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.

True personal wisdom involves five elements, said Professor Staudinger, now a life span psychologist and professor at Columbia University. They are self-insight; the ability to demonstrate personal growth; self-awareness in terms of your historical era and your family history; understanding that priorities and values, including your own, are not absolute; and an awareness of life's ambiguities.

Wisdom in this sense is extremely rare, Professor Staudinger said, and research has shown that it actually declines in the final decades. As a coping strategy, it is better to be positive about life when you are older, she said, and the older people skew that way. They are more likely to look back on their lives and say that the events that occurred were for the best; a wise person would fully acknowledge mistakes and losses, and still try to improve.

**True wisdom involves recognizing the negative both within and outside ourselves and trying to learn from it, she said.**

Modern definitions of wisdom tend to stress kindness — even if it's not on the order of Buddha, Gandhi or the Dalai Lama. Wisdom is characterized by a “reduction in self-centeredness,” Professor Ardelt said. Wise people try to understand situations from multiple perspectives, not just their own, and they show tolerance as a result.

“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.”

## **But Professor Carstensen does study emotional regulation, and says that is a key component of wisdom.**

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If you are wise, she said, “ You’re not only regulating your emotional state, you’re also attending to another person’s emotional state.” She added: “ You’re not focusing so much on what you need and deserve, but on what you can contribute.”

Daniel Goleman, author of “ Focus” and “ Emotional Intelligence,” said, “ One aspect of wisdom is having a very wide horizon which doesn’t center on ourselves,” or even on our group or organization.

He said an important sign of wisdom was “ generativity,” a term used by the psychologist Erik Erikson, who developed an influential theory on stages of the human life span. Generativity means giving back without needing anything in return, Dr. Goleman said. The form of giving back could be creative, social, personal or financial, and “ the wisest people do that in a way that doesn’t see their lifetime as limiting when this might happen,” he said.

Dr. Goleman interviewed Erikson, along with his wife, Joan, in the late 1980s, when both were in their 80s. Erikson’s theory of human development had initially included eight stages, from infancy to old age. When the Eriksons

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themselves reached old age, though, they found a need to add a ninth stage of development, one in which wisdom plays a crucial role. “ They depict an old age in which one has enough conviction in one’s own completeness to ward off the despair that gradual physical disintegration can too easily bring,” Dr. Goleman wrote in *The Times*.

In the final years of life, “ Even the simple activities of daily living may present difficulty and conflict,” Joan Erikson wrote in an expanded version of her husband’s book, “ *The Life Cycle Completed*.” “ No wonder elders become tired and often depressed.” The book adds: “ To face down despair with faith and appropriate humility is perhaps the wisest course.”

“ One must join in the process of adaptation. With whatever tact and wisdom we can muster, disabilities must be accepted with lightness and humor.”

Whatever the nature of one’s limitations, simplifying one’s life is also a sign of wisdom, Dr. Clayton said, for example, by giving your things away while you are still alive. Some people have trouble with the idea of settling for less — “ they’ve gotten so used to the game of acquiring more,” she said.

Settling for less and simplifying is not the same as giving up. In fact, when older people lack challenges, self-absorption and stagnation may take over, the Eriksons said. The key is to set goals that match one’s current capacities.

Continuing education can be an important way to cultivate wisdom in the later years, researchers say, for one thing because it combats isolation. But training in practical skills may be less useful for older people than courses in the humanities that help people make sense of their lives, Professor Ardelt says. She and other researchers recommend classes in guided

autobiography, or life review, as a way of strengthening wisdom. In guided autobiography, students write and share their life stories with the help of a trained instructor.

Dr. Clayton says there's a point in life when a fundamental shift occurs, and people start thinking about how much time they have left rather than how long they have lived. Reflecting on the meaning and structure of their lives, she said, can help people thrive after the balance shifts and there is much less time left than has gone before.

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