

February 28, 2001
For Immediate Release

Improving Memory Among Older Americans

Aging baby boomers often complain of having forgetful "senior moments," but new evidence suggests the memories of older Americans may have improved during the last decade.

Memory problems still increase with age, but a new study shows that the typical senior performed much better on memory tests in 1998 than in 1993. Only 4 percent of Americans ages 70 and older and living in the community were identified as having severe memory problems in 1998, down from 6 percent in 1993.

The study, co-authored by Vicki Freedman, PhD, and Hakan Aykan, PhD., of Philadelphia Geriatric Center's Polisher Research Institute, and Linda Martin, PhD, of the New York-based Population Council, appears in the March 2001 issue of the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*.

The research, based on interviews with more than 10,000 seniors, carried out by the University of Michigan (**Asset and Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old-AHEAD**), included several memory tests. Participants were asked, for example, to repeat a list of 10 words, to count backwards from 100 by seven, and to name the president and vice president of the United States. For participants too impaired to take the tests, family members and friends provided reports of memory problems.

Improvements were experienced by both men and women and were especially large for those in the 80s and those with less than a high school education.

Study authors caution that these results are preliminary and need to be replicated by other scientists before understanding their full implications. Yet they speculate these improvements may be part of a longer trend brought about by multiple factors.

"Better treatments developed over the last decade for dementia, depression, and strokes, for example, may be aiding memory and brain function for some older persons," says Dr. Freedman, the study's lead author. "Changes in health-related behaviors - such as eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and for women, taking hormone replacement therapy - may also be at work."

Older Americans are also better educated today than a decade ago, but that fact doesn't account for all the improvements. "The largest improvements we found were among seniors who never graduated from high school," explains Dr. Freedman. "This finding suggests forces outside the classroom may be involved."

"We are very intrigued by this study and its suggestion that severe cognitive impairment in the older population may have declined over time," says Dr. Richard M. Suzman, Associate Director for **Behavioral and Social**

Research at the National Institute on Aging, which funded the research.

"This report follows the line of other, initially surprising studies during the 1990s, which found a reduction in the rate of physical disability among older people. As we did then, we will encourage researchers to replicate these initial findings and, if confirmed, work to understand why such improvements may be happening."

Whether improvements in memory are leading to improvements in physical functioning or vice versa have not yet been determined. But either way, the results are good news for an aging population. As Dr. Freedman points out,

"Our study suggests being old and being of sound mind may be more compatible than ever. "

Philadelphia Geriatric Center is a nationally recognized leader in providing services to the elderly.

The Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences is a refereed publication of the Gerontological Society of America, the national organization of professionals in the field of aging.

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