

Lifelong Learning

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Lifelong learning is regarded as an important component in maintaining cognitive functioning in older age and has been at the center of many educational policies and psychological interventions. However, since this concept is broad and multi-faceted, some researchers argue that lifelong learning cannot be attributed a single, all-encompassing definition, but instead can hold different meanings in various contexts. For instance, some researchers perceive it as a process that inherently occurs throughout the course of one's life. This type of learning is said to be unique to each individual, because it is dependent on several factors, such as personal interests, environmental and societal constraints, and motivation. Other researchers view lifelong learning as a more deliberate, formal, and intensive process that results in meaningful outcomes, such as academic degrees and diplomas. This type of learning is best exemplified in higher education and vocational schooling, which some argue is a less effective means of learning for older adults. This entry provides a brief overview of the benefits of engaging in either formal or informal methods of lifelong learning. Specifically, it explains correlational studies and interventions demonstrating that engaging in lifelong learning increases cognitive abilities and general well-being, and existing resources for engaging in lifelong learning.

There is no doubt that there are benefits to continued learning throughout the lifespan, whether it be formal or informal, as many previous correlational studies and interventions have provided evidence for such benefits. For instance, one study revealed that individuals with more years of schooling were also more likely to exhibit self-directed learning readiness. In turn, an

association was discovered between such readiness and higher levels of life satisfaction. Another study found that there were improvements among many aspects, ranging from happiness to cognitive functioning, for older adults who were more involved in educational activities. A higher education level seems to be one of the best predictors of level of cognitive decline later in life. In addition, one case study, in particular, concluded that societies can largely benefit in establishing a lifelong learning institute that older adults can attend. In particular, participation in courses provided by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI), which are learning programs geared towards older adults and typically found out at local universities, can engender beneficial results, ranging from spiritual renewal to increases in self-esteem. Moreover, even continued learning of technological advances, such as mobile phone applications, can even assist in maintaining one's autonomy. Some researchers argue that lifelong learning may have the potential to stave off or at least mitigate the effects of dementia pathology or other negative impacts on one's cognitive functioning. Other researchers suggest that lifelong learning can lead to optimal aging outcomes when individuals continue learning as frequently and rigorously as they did during the earlier half of the lifespan (i.e., infancy through young adulthood).

Luckily, there are many existing effective resources geared towards continued formal and informal learning in adulthood. Formal learning resources typically consist of learning programs hosted by the government and community organizations, such as OLLI, mentioned earlier. Similar classes may also be found through local senior centers and retirement institutions. While having such programs is important, especially given that some individuals may prefer the routine and structure of having weekly or monthly classes, many individuals may not have access to these resources due to physical, financial, or other limitations. Therefore, alternate means of engaging in lifelong learning that are more easily accessible include in-home and community

resources, such as instructional videos on Youtube and ad hoc reading groups. As such, it is important to first acknowledge that lifelong learning does not necessarily have to occur at an educational institution, as some have argued. While such places can potentially engender more effective results, due to the structure, intensity, and duration of the courses offered, positive results may also ensue from peer-learning, self-directed learning, and online learning. For instance, one study showed that self-directed learning was successful at improving health education literacy among adults. Being taught by peers or spouses and increasing opportunities for socialization may even attract older adults to participate in educational activities. Peer learning among older adults has also been seen as an effective and enjoyable means of learning. Therefore, a variety of resources are available for a wide range of individuals for the purposes of participating in lifelong learning.

Overall, lifelong learning, whether it be formal or informal, can result in an abundance of benefits, ranging from prolonged independence to heightened life satisfaction, bolstering the idea that such learning plays an important role in successful aging.

Further Reading

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