Psychological Distancing May Be Key to Wisdom
People who look at things in a self-centered way less likely to reason wisely, research suggests

THURSDAY, July 21 (HealthDay News) -- Wisdom is gained by looking at things from a distance like a "fly on a wall," a new study contends.

By adopting this perspective of psychological distance, people are more likely to reason wisely in their daily lives, researchers from the University of Michigan found.

"Although humans strive to be wise, they often fail to do so when reasoning about issues that have profound personal implications," study co-author Ethan Kross, a U-M psychologist, said in a university news release.

Previous studies have found that people with a universal perspective are actually processing information differently than those with a more self-centered view.

Research has also shown that dialecticism (realizing the world is in flux and the future is likely to change) and intellectual humility (recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge) are key aspects of wise reasoning.

In conducting this latest study, published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, researchers examined how the use of both of these aspects of wisdom -- dialecticism and intellectual humility -- varied in two different experiments.

Investigators asked 57 college seniors and recent graduates who were unable to find jobs to choose cards from a deck describing the U.S. recession and high levels of unemployment, and think about how the economy would affect them personally. Next, they were assigned to reason out loud about the topic from either a self-centered or distanced perspective.

"We found that participants who adopted a distanced perspective were significantly more likely to recognize the limits of their knowledge and to acknowledge that the future was likely to change," the study's co-author, U-M psychologist doctoral student Igor Grossmann, said in the news release.

In a second study conducted right before the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the researchers asked 54 politically polarized people to read summaries of the candidates' positions on different political issues, and focus on two issues they felt strongly about. The participants were then asked to reason out loud from either a self-centered or a distanced perspective about how those issues would evolve if their preferred candidate lost the election.

The study found that those who adopted a distanced perspective were more likely to reason wisely. They also became more cooperative and less polarized in their political views, with some even electing to join a bipartisan discussion group.

"It's important to note that these shifts in wise reasoning and behavior occurred in response to relatively simple manipulations," noted Kross. "This suggests that people may not need to go to great lengths to reason wisely in daily life."
The study authors concluded that their findings provide some insight into wisdom. "They contribute to a clearer understanding of how distancing promotes wisdom, and enhance knowledge about how wisdom operates and how it can be cultivated in daily life," Grossmann explained.

More information
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