

総合英語レベル7② A Study on Aging

予習課題 次の英文を読んで、内容を理解しなさい。

Contrary to popular belief, the process of aging is not a disease. This is the principal finding of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, the longest-running and most influential project of its kind in the United States. From the start, the project took a unique approach: Rather than examine sickness in the elderly researchers aimed to follow healthy active people and try to define “normal aging.” More than 24,000 research subjects have participated in the study and the results have repeatedly contradicted stereotypes about the elderly by showing that aging need not be a process of rapid decline.

First among the landmark findings is that personality does not change with age. According to research published over the last 15 years, seniors who are depressed or cranky were usually much the same as young adults. Second, while memory seems to weaken over time and the brain may need increasingly more time to make and execute decisions, vocabulary continues to grow in late life, and problem-solving and reasoning skills suffer only a minor reduction. Third, the physical health of the elderly is often underestimated. For example, a healthy heart just keeps ticking. Tests since the late 1970s have proven that cardiac structure and function do not become weaker over time unless the individual suffers from coronary disease.

The long-term approach taken by the study’s founders allowed their study to grow from several dozen participants at the outset to the roughly 1,100 involved at present. Research subjects range in age from participants in their 20s to those in their 90s, and each individual will be followed to the end of his or her life. This steadily increasing amount of data has refuted a central myth about growing old—that everyone ages at the same rate. Quite the opposite appears to be true, which accounts for the tremendous range in health status among seniors, a range for greater than the differences found among young people. Recognition of this diversity among the elderly, many gerontologists believe, will be one of the study’s lasting achievements.

In the meantime, the study has made major contributions in wholly unexpected areas. Researchers in the project who focus on cognitive ability and mental decline among the aged have recently linked Alzheimer’s disease to a decline in short-term visual memory that shows up long before other signs of mental impairment. Relatively simple cognitive tests of visual memory can now potentially alert physicians who are treating and evaluating aged patients. This particular finding alone will eventually help identify people at high risk for Alzheimer’s and perhaps hasten treatment before the brain is irreversibly damaged.