

**MCKNIGHT BRAIN RESEARCH FOUNDATION
MCKNIGHT BRAIN INSTITUTES
COMMUNICATIONS WORKING GROUP
KEY MESSAGES ON COGNITIVE AGING, COGNITIVE DECLINE AND MEMORY LOSS DUE TO AGING
April 2019**

The following key messages were developed by the Communications Working Group, reviewed by the Leadership Council, and endorsed by the McKnight Brain Research Foundation (MBRF) Board of Trustees. These messages are meant as the foundation for a “common language” among the four McKnight Brain Institutes and the MBRF. The messages are not meant to be prescriptive or limiting in any way, but instead are meant to be a starting point for discussions with the public or with media.

We envision that these messages will be used by spokespeople representing the McKnight Brain Research Foundation and McKnight Brain Institutes to help raise the level of public awareness about cognitive aging and age-related memory loss. Considering recent scientific advances, there is growing evidence that cognition and brain health can be maintained throughout life. Using the messages below in a consistent manner will help the McKnight network of experts share information with the public in a relatable, engaging manner. The messages are meant as a guide to help convey consistent points across interviews and should be customized and expanded as needed.

1. What is Cognitive Aging?

Three proposed scientific summary statements:

- Cognitive aging refers to the effect age has on cognition.
- The effects, and therefore impact, of cognitive aging are not uniform. *They can involve one cognitive domain (e.g., memory), or another (e.g., processing speed.) They may impact a person in subtle ways that can be annoying, like not instantly finding the right word, or forgetting where you put your glasses.*
- Cognitive aging is NOT defined by a neurological or psychiatric disease or process.

Proposed key messages in lay terms:

- As we age, our brains age too.
 - Cognitive aging is a natural process that can have both positive and negative effects.
 - These effects vary widely from person to person.
- Our brains age at different rates and in different ways.
 - While wisdom, expertise and vocabulary increase with age, other abilities like processing speed, decision-making and some types of memory may decline with age.
- Cognitive aging is not a disease.
 - The brain changes associated with aging are part of a natural process that starts at birth and continues throughout the lifespan.
- With behavioral and lifestyle changes, there is increasing evidence that cognition and brain health can be maintained.

2. What is Successful Aging?

Proposed scientific summary statement about what activities or behaviors could maintain brain and cognitive health throughout life and help delay or minimize the negative effects of cognitive aging:

- Cognitive training and increased physical activity are interventions that have encouraging, although inconclusive, evidence in delaying or slowing age-related cognitive decline. *(Cognitive training is defined as a broad set of interventions, such as those aimed at enhancing reasoning, memory, and speed of processing).¹*

¹ National Academies of Sciences, E., et al., in *Preventing Cognitive Decline and Dementia: A Way Forward*, A. Downey, et al., Editors. 2017, National Academies Press (US)

Proposed key messages in lay terms:

- Successful aging is normal brain aging without changes in memory or thinking skills that affect activities of daily living.
- Research suggests there are steps you can take to age successfully and maintain brain health as you age, including:
 - Staying physically active;
 - Reducing and managing your risk for cardiovascular diseases by managing your blood pressure, weight, and cholesterol levels;
 - Regularly discussing with family members any noticeable changes in your cognitive abilities or memory. Ask them to tell you and your doctor about the changes they may have noticed;
 - Regularly reviewing with your physician the health conditions you have and the medications and supplements you take that may impact your cognitive health;
 - Staying socially and intellectually engaged; and
 - Getting the recommended amount of sleep.

3. Importance of Cognitive Health Assessments/Steps to Minimize Risk

Scientific summary statements:

- Cognitive aging is not easily defined by clear thresholds on cognitive tests since many factors, including culture, occupation, education, environmental context and health variables (medications, depression) influence test performance and norms.
- For an individual, cognitive performance is best assessed at several points in time.
- The changes that happen with aging are usually so subtle that it's hard to test for them other than with sequential evaluation and advanced neurological tests.

Proposed key messages in lay terms:

- Changes with your brain health happen slowly over time and aren't always easy to detect. Changes in your ability to process, learn or remember can be caused by stress, depression, loneliness, hearing and vision loss, and financial problems, among other difficulties.
- Be sure to talk with your family and your healthcare providers about any memory changes you notice or concerns you have, and ask if you should undergo a cognitive assessment.
- It's never too soon or too late to protect your brain health. Taking steps now, like staying physically active, getting enough sleep and reducing and managing your risk for cardiovascular disease can help minimize the effects of cognitive aging and help you age successfully.
- Because aging happens over a lifetime, it is good to encourage younger people to pay attention to the things that will help them to age successfully.

4. Cost Associated with Cognitive Aging and Memory Loss/Prevalence

Given the lack of data quantifying the number of people affected by cognitive aging and the associated cost, the statistics below can be used to help frame the issue in terms of prevalence and concern.

"The 87%", The Journals of Gerontology, Series A, Vol 67, Issue 7, July 2012 - Molly V. Wagster, PhD, et al

- One in eight people 65 and older (13 percent) develops Alzheimer's disease.
- The remaining 87 percent are experiencing cognitive changes attributable to the normal aging process to varying degrees.

AARP 2016 Member Opinion Survey Results

- 84 percent of members surveyed (age 50 and older) were very concerned with staying mentally sharp.
- Staying mentally sharp (90 percent) and physically fit (87 percent) were the top two health/self-related interests among those surveyed.