

Curious people embrace richer experiences, but cognitive test scores tell a more complicated story

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Credit: <https://museum.industry411.com/engaging-older-adults-successful-museum-programs-that-combat-social-isolation-and-ageism/>

We often hear that a curious mind is a sharp mind, particularly as we age. According to scientists, persistent learners are often open to taking

on new challenges and trying new activities. The idea is that engaging with new experiences can help ward off dementia. But is that really the case?

A new study, published in [*Personality and Individual Differences*](#), examined 106 healthy adults ages 40–85. Curious people in the study reported more education and mentally stimulating hobbies. However, they did not score better on tests of memory, attention or processing speed.

The study's authors noted that trait curiosity "tends to engage more in cognitively stimulating activities throughout the lifespan" yet was not associated with cognitive abilities in these adults.

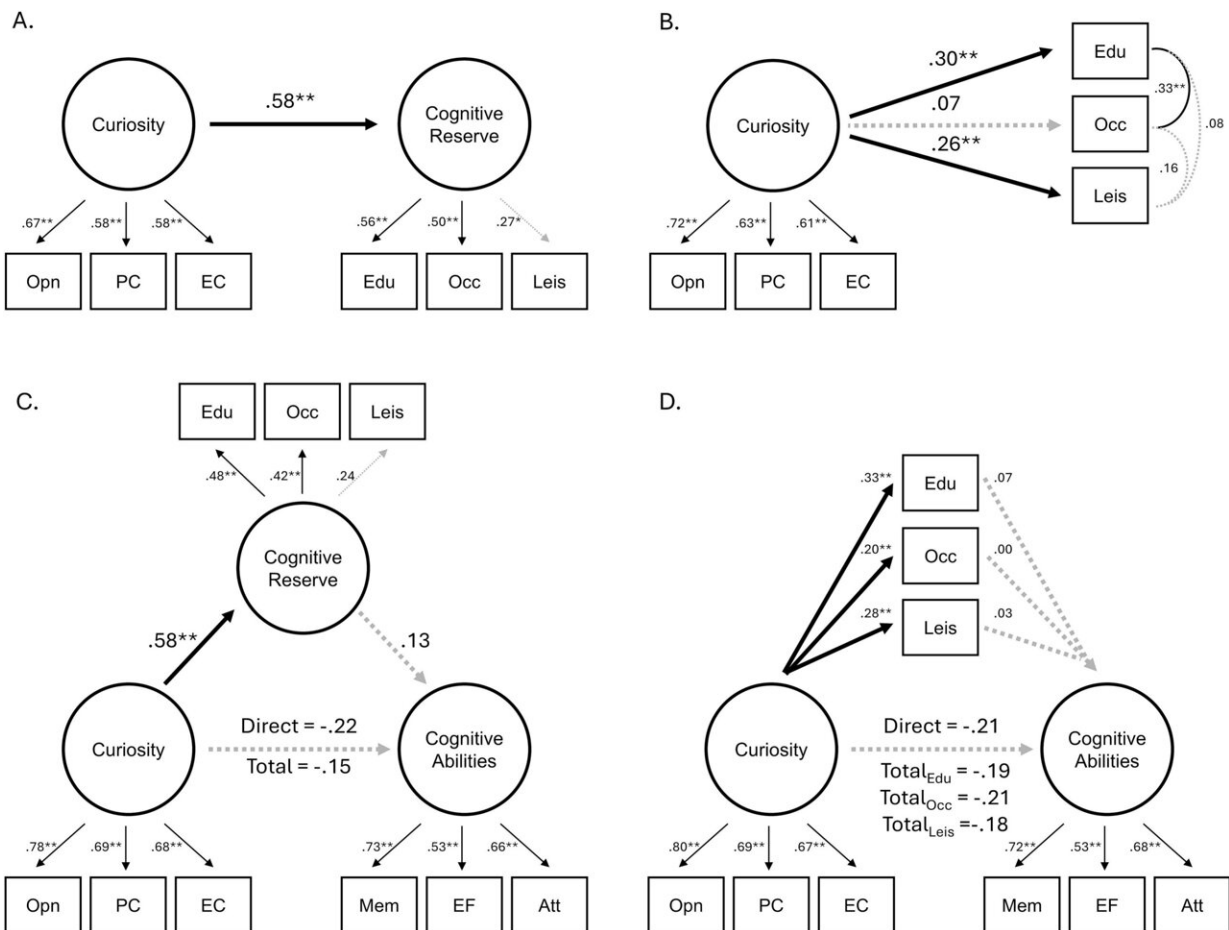
Curiosity as a brain shield?

Curiosity often gets credit as a booster for learning and brain health. Psychologists point out that curiosity "is continually exhibited throughout the lifespan" and is tied to several health advantages. Studies have shown that people who are curious about information tend to retain it better. Openness to experience has also been tied to more challenging activities and less cognitive decline in other longitudinal studies.

The idea is that curiosity pushes us toward complex education, careers or hobbies—all factors that build [*cognitive reserve*](#), a buffer against age-related brain changes.

Until now, research has focused more on short-term curiosity or younger age groups, leaving little indication of whether a curious personality throughout life leads to better psychological functioning in middle age. This is where the current investigation steps in. The scientists asked hundreds of curiosity-related questions and administered cognitive tests.

They estimated curiosity in each participant by measuring curiosity and openness scores on personality tests, as well as tallying life experiences such as years spent in education, job complexity and how often people engaged in mentally stimulating activities, including solving puzzles, reading, playing musical instruments and games (Cognitive Reserve Index questionnaire).



Path diagrams of the Bayesian Structural Equation Models. Credit: *Personality and Individual Differences* (2026). DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2026.114011

Rich lives, not sharper minds

What they found was a clear link between curiosity and life experience—but not between curiosity and brain test scores. In statistical models, adults with higher trait curiosity had more education and more stimulating leisure activities. This fits the researchers' observation that "individuals with higher levels of curiosity ... tend to engage more in cognitively stimulating activities across the lifespan." Curious people reported the kinds of rich, lifelong learning experiences that build cognitive reserve.

However, those extra years of school or demanding hobbies did not make the curious group outperform others on cognitive tests. The models showed no evidence that being more curious—or having higher cognitive reserve proxies like education and hobbies—was linked to better performance on memory, attention or speed tests.

As one author put it, "We did not find evidence that either a curious personality or CR proxies was associated with cognitive abilities in this sample." The findings show that curiosity shaped how these adults spent their lives, but it did not give them measurable brainpower on test day.

A reality check—for now

Why the mismatch? According to the authors, the study was cross-sectional—it cannot show that curiosity leads to enrichment because people with higher intelligence or wealth may also be more naturally curious. The sample was also relatively small, healthy and had above-average intelligence, meaning older adults or people with dementia were underrepresented.

Moreover, "reserve" was assessed through an interview rather than brain scans, which could make it difficult to evaluate.

Still, the findings are important. They indicate that we should not idealize curiosity as a magical elixir for brain health later in life. Simply increasing the number of puzzles or lessons will not necessarily improve memory performance—at least not in isolation.

What is valuable about curiosity is its potential to enrich our lives. When we delight in exploring new areas, we create a more enriching and fulfilling existence. Brain health programs could benefit from focusing on learning and discovery for their own sake.

Keep exploring—for the thrill

In essence, the findings provide a reality check for many common assertions. Being a curious person may mean living an educational and exploratory life. However, these factors did not necessarily improve brain function on short-term tests.

The main point is that fostering curiosity and lifelong learning should be applauded because they make life more entertaining and fulfilling—not simply because they may improve cognitive function or memory.

More information: Carolien Torenvliet et al, Curious people, resilient minds? The role of a curious personality in cognitive reserve and cognitive abilities, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2026). DOI: [10.1016/j.paid.2026.114011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2026.114011)

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