

What the world needs now? More wisdom

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Revolution in Libya. Revolution in Egypt. Revolution in Tunisia. The Middle East and North Africa face unprecedented change as dictatorships crumble and people clamor for democracy.

Yet it remains unclear whether these nations will experience more equity under new regimes. The reshaping of societies raises fundamental questions that require monumental thought. "What the world needs now, especially in these times, is more wisdom," observes Dolores Pushkar, a professor in Concordia's Department of Psychology and member of the Centre for Research in Human Development.

While all nations need wise leaders, the Middle East and North [Africa](#) require sensible leaders with fresh outlooks who are in antithesis to self-serving dictators of the past. "Since wisdom is defined as something that benefits society as a whole as well as the self," continues Pushkar.

Human wellbeing and life satisfaction

Current events are on Pushkar's mind, since the bulk of her research has focused on human wellbeing and [life satisfaction](#). And she's found wisdom plays a central role in both. "Wisdom and intelligence aren't the same thing," she points out, estimating that only 5 percent of the population can be described as truly wise and that advanced insight begins after adolescence as the brain matures.

Pushkar recently coauthored an overview on the topic, [What Philosophers Say Compared with What Psychologists Find in Discerning](#)

Values: How Wise People Interpret Life. Her coauthors include Andrew Burr, Sarah Etezadi and Tracy Lyster of the Concordia Department of Psychology and Sheila Mason of the Department of Philosophy.

The research team compiled data from several Concordia studies, as well as international findings, to assess how wisdom shapes life. The result? "Wisdom has an impact on how people cope in situations and whether they are more or less satisfied with life," explains Etezadi, a PhD student under Pushkar's direction.

No single definition of wisdom exists, but hallmarks include knowledge, deep understanding of human nature, life contentment, empathy and the flexibility to see issues from others' perspectives. "Wise people can see the positive side of a negative situation," says Etezadi, adding the wise are open to new avenues. "A practical aspect of wisdom is how it translates to street smarts."

Injustice can prevent people from garnering wisdom

Yet studies have shown that overwhelming and prolonged stress, in cases such as genocide or soul-crushing child abuse, are injustices that can prevent people from garnering wisdom. "The more overwhelming the stress, the greater its magnitude, the less likely people are to develop wisdom from the experience," says Pushkar, citing research from peers undertaken after major calamities and wars. "Chronic adversity can destroy wisdom."

Pushkar stresses that wise people often espouse common sense – but what makes them smarter than most is how they actually follow their own advice. And contrary to popular notions, gender does not influence wisdom. "For centuries, males had access to education and that's how the stereotype of the wise old man came to be," says Etezadi.

Age is another irrelevant factor in life smarts. "Some people garner wisdom sooner than others," Pushkar suggests. "That's why we call them old souls, since they are quicker to learn what leads to a better life."

Etezadi and Pushkar, who notably studied life contentment among seniors, also discovered that lifelong optimists are wiser than their pessimistic peers. "We found that [people](#) who are wiser maintain a sense of happiness," says Etezadi. "They are high on [wisdom](#), which has a buffering effect."

"Bitterness," Pushkar counters, "disqualifies a person from being considered as wise. It means they haven't learned any beneficial lessons from their experience."

Provided by Concordia University

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