

Intervention studies for enhancing cognitive functioning in older adults: theoretical and methodological considerations

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Prominent theories of lifespan development have acknowledged the role of compensation as a mechanism for dealing with age-related decline across a range of functional abilities in old and very old age. From such theories of compensation, it has been suggested that strategic interventions and/or training regimens may be one way to help older adults mitigate age-related functional loss. This symposium examines specific intervention strategies designed to assist older adults who experience deficits in sensory functioning, cognitive processes (such as memory and executive functioning), and complex skill acquisition. The goal of this overview paper will be to provide a general framework for understanding and integrating the findings of empirically-driven intervention studies. With respect to this overview, four broad conceptual domains that are germane to compensation in old age will be described; namely, (1) the relationship of human aging and reserve capacity on the compensatory response, (2) the role of individual differences with respect to one's capability to actualize a compensatory response, (3) the extent to which compensatory strategy training can generalize beyond the training context (or task) to real-world issues, and (4) the necessary conditions that must exist for an intervention-initiated compensatory response to be maintained over time. Specific examples in the scientific literature will be used to elucidate each domain.

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