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experience, but new research indicates that there might be a way to develop your capacity to make wise decisions.

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RESEARCH NEWS

Teach yourself to be wiser

BY DIANE SWANBROW

July 13, 2011

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Adopting a psychologically distanced perspective enhances wisdom, according to University of Michigan research published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"Although humans strive to be wise, they often fail to do so when reasoning about issues that have profound personal implications," said U-M psychologist Ethan Kross, who co-authored the article with doctoral student Igor Grossmann. "These experiments suggest a promising way for people to reason wisely about such issues."

Previous research has shown that two common aspects of wise reasoning are: dialecticism—realizing that the world is in flux and the future is likely to change; and intellectual humility—recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge.

Earlier research by Kross, an assistant professor of psychology and faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research, and others has shown that adopting a self-immersed, egocentric perspective—imagining that events are unfolding before your own eyes—has a different effect on how information is processed than adopting a distanced perspective—imagining that events are unfolding at a distance, from the point of view of a distant observer or "fly on the wall."

So Kross and Grossmann investigated how the use of dialecticism and intellectual humility varied depending on which perspective participants adopted in situations where the issue at stake had a great deal of personal importance.

They conducted two experiments. In the first, they tested 57 college seniors and recent graduates who had been unable to find jobs.

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handful of great directors got their starts in their own backyards.

Each participant chose a card from a deck that described the recent U.S. recession and unemployment rates. They were asked to take a few minutes to think about how the economic climate would affect them personally, and then were randomly assigned to reason aloud about this topic from either an immersed or a distanced perspective.

"We found that participants who adopted a distanced perspective were significantly more likely to recognize the limits of their knowledge and to acknowledge that the future was likely to change," said Grossmann, whose dissertation on wisdom was supported by a Daniel Katz Fellowship from the Institute for Social Research.

In the second study, conducted three weeks before the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the researchers tested 54 participants who were strongly liberal or conservative. Participants read summaries of the Democratic and Republican positions on different political issues, and were then asked to focus on two issues about which they felt strongly. Next, they were randomly assigned to reason aloud about how each issue would develop over the next four years if the candidate that they did not endorse won the election from either an immersed or a distanced perspective.

As in the first study, participants who adopted a distanced perspective were more likely to reason wisely in their discussions. They also became more cooperative—they endorsed their political ideologies less strongly after the experiment, and were more likely to sign up to join a bipartisan political discussion group.

"It's important to note that these shifts in wise reasoning and behavior occurred in response to relatively simple manipulations," said Kross. "This suggests that people may not need to go to great lengths to reason wisely in daily life."

Grossman says the current findings begin to demystify wisdom.

"They contribute to a clearer understanding of how distancing promotes wisdom, and enhance knowledge about how wisdom operates and how it can be cultivated in daily life," said Grossmann, who will be an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Waterloo in Canada starting next year.

What do you think? Can wisdom be "practiced" and developed? Or is it only something you can achieve with time and hard experience? Speak your mind in the comments section.

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Diane Swanbrow is a writer with the [University of Michigan News Service](#).

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