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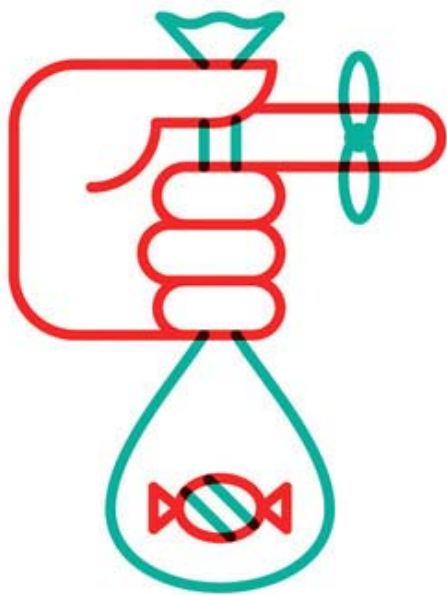
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WEEK IN IDEAS | February 8, 2013, 8:28 p.m. ET

# Week in Ideas: Daniel Akst

## BEHAVIOR

### *Bright Minds*



Oliver Munday

Older people exhibit better decision-making and working memory when put in a good mood.

Older people exhibit better decision-making and working memory when put in a good mood, a study finds.

Researchers tested 46 adults, age 63 to 85. Before the test, half were given a thank-you card and two small bags of candy tied with a ribbon. (To avoid introducing the effects of a sugar rush, they were told not to eat the candy on the spot.) The other half got nothing.

The group that received the small mood-boosters performed better on the decision-making test and at reciting numbers and letters that had been read aloud to them.

The findings are consistent with earlier work showing that young adults in a positive mood do better at mental tasks.

*"Positive Feelings Facilitate Working Memory and Complex Decision Making Among Older Adults," Stephanie M. Carpenter, Ellen Peters, Daniel Västfjäll and Alice M. Isen, Cognition and Emotion (January)*

## INVESTING

### *Trusty Trustees?*

Do investment firms acting as 401(k) trustees show favoritism toward their own mutual funds?

Yes, according to a trio of business-school professors who looked at data on defined-contribution plans from 1998 to 2009. Trustees have a duty to act in the interests of investors, but they also have a financial incentive to corral retirement dollars into their own funds.

That incentive appears to be powerful. The researchers found that "poorly performing funds are less likely to be removed from and more likely to be added to a 401(k) menu if they are affiliated with the plan trustee." In fact, the biggest contrast in the treatment of affiliated and nonaffiliated funds was

found among the worst performers, which were 2.5 times likelier to be removed from the menu if they were unaffiliated with the trustee.

*"It Pays to Set the Menu: Mutual Fund Investment Options In 401(k) Plans," Veronika K. Pool, Clemens Sialm and Irina Stefanescu, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 18764 (February)*

## PSYCHOLOGY

### *The Age of Empathy*

Who cares? Middle-age women.

That's one way to describe the findings of a new study that looked at empathy and age. Researchers took stock of empathy questionnaires completed by more than 75,000 people and found that empathy peaks when people are in their 50s. Consistent with earlier research, women in general were more empathic than men.

The scientists said that more research is needed on these findings, which might be attributable to some other factor related to aging or might arise from the experience of this particular cohort, whose lives encompassed social upheavals, such as the civil-rights movement, "emphasizing the feelings and perspectives of other groups."

The study also found that young adults in 2010 scored lower in empathy than their counterparts a decade earlier.

*"Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking: Linear and Quadratic Effects of Age Across the Adult Life Span," Ed O'Brien, Sara H. Konrath, Daniel Grühn and Anna Linda Hagen, The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences (forthcoming)*



### *Reinventing the Wheel(Chair)*

At last, someone has reinvented the wheel—as a fold-up—and wheelchair users could benefit.

Invented by Duncan Fitzsimons of the London firm Vitamins, the design relies on a standard solid wheelchair tire—an inflatable would lose air when folded—and a wheel made of plastic reinforced by glass fiber and supported by sturdy folding spokes. It should enable the production of a wheelchair that fits into the overhead bin of a commercial airliner.



Vitamins had been trying to improve the performance of folding bicycles, but wheelchair users became interested, the company says.

*A version of this article appeared February 9, 2013, on page C4 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Week in Ideas: Daniel Akst Reinventing the Wheel (Chair).*