

Getting older provides positive outlook

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Research conducted at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs proves not everything goes downhill when it comes to aging.

Older adults exhibit a better balance than younger adults in the way they process emotional information from the environment, according to research completed by Michael Kisley, assistant professor, Psychology, along with his collaborator, Stacey Wood from Scripps College and with the assistance of students at UCCS.

More than 150 participants viewed images determined to be positive (a bowl of chocolate ice cream, pretty sunsets), neutral (a chair, a fork) and negative (a dead cat in the road, a car crash). Viewing images for only seconds, participants clicked a mouse to categorize these photographs while their brain reaction was monitored.

"Whereas younger adults often pay more attention to emotionally negative information, older adults tend to assign equal importance to emotionally positive information," explained Kisley. "This has implications for many domains including, for example, decision making."

"Like previous studies, we found that younger adults, 18-25, tended to pay more attention to emotionally negative images than to positive ones," Kisley said. "But the new finding from our study was that the older adults, ages 55 plus, didn't show this so-called 'negative bias.' Instead they tended to show a better balance between paying attention to both negative and positive images."

Kisley and Wood conducted a follow-up study to be published in Psychological Science in fall 2007 in which they found that the change in emotional priorities gradually develops from age 18 to 80.

Since so much psychological research is conducted on college-aged students, a somewhat captive audience that does often react to the positive stimuli, examining the reactions of older adults brings new focus to this area of research. As a result of their findings, Kisley said they are collecting data for follow-up studies.

"We would like to know, for example, whether the observed change in emotional priorities with aging is automatic, unconscious change or whether it results from conscious effort on the part of the older adult to switch their world view," he said. "Determining the answer to this question has implications for the well-being of seniors in general, but especially for individuals who are dealing with hardships including the loss of a spouse or major health conditions including cancer or mental illness.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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