

Think memory worsens with age? Then yours probably will

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Thinking your memory will get worse as you get older may actually be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Researchers at North Carolina State University have found that senior citizens who think older people should perform poorly on tests of memory actually score much worse than seniors who do not buy in to negative stereotypes about aging and memory loss.

In a study published earlier this month, psychology professor Dr. Tom Hess and a team of researchers from NC State show that older adults' ability to remember suffers when negative stereotypes are "activated" in a given situation. "For example, older adults will perform more poorly on a memory test if they are told that older folks do poorly on that particular type of [memory test](#)," Hess says. Memory also suffers if senior citizens believe they are being "stigmatized," meaning that others are looking down on them because of their age.

"Such situations may be a part of older adults' everyday experience," Hess says, "such as being concerned about what others think of them at work having a negative effect on their performance - and thus potentially reinforcing the negative stereotypes." However, Hess adds, "The positive flip side of this is that those who do not feel stigmatized, or those in situations where more positive views of aging are activated, exhibit significantly higher levels of memory performance." In other words, if you are confident that aging will not ravage your memory, you are more likely to perform well on memory-related tasks.

The study also found a couple of factors that influenced the extent to

which negative stereotypes influence older adults. For example, the researchers found that adults between the ages of 60 and 70 suffered more when these [negative stereotypes](#) were activated than [seniors](#) who were between the ages of 71 and 82. However, the 71-82 age group performed worse when they felt stigmatized.

Finally, the study found that negative effects were strongest for those older adults with the highest levels of education. "We interpret this as being consistent with the idea that those who value their ability to remember things most are the most likely to be sensitive to the negative implications of stereotypes, and thus are most likely to exhibit the problems associated with the stereotype."

"The take-home message," Hess says, "is that social factors may have a negative effect on older adults' memory performance."

Hess is the lead author on the study, "Moderators of and Mechanisms Underlying Stereotype Threat Effects on Older Adults' [Memory](#) Performance." Co-authors on the study are former NC State students Joey T. Hinson and Elizabeth A. Hodges. The study was published online April 1 by *Experimental Aging Research*.

Source: North Carolina State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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