

Friendships, family relationships get better with age thanks to forgiveness, stereotypes

June 25 2010, by Amy Patterson Neubert

Part of what makes those relationships so golden during the golden years is that people of all ages are more likely to forgive and respect one's elders, according to research from Purdue University.

"Older adults report better marriages, more supportive friendships and less conflict with children and siblings," said Karen Fingerman, the Berner-Hanley Professor in Gerontology, Developmental and Family Studies. "While physical and [cognitive abilities](#) decline with age, relationships improve. So what is so special about old age? We found that the perception of limited time, willingness to forgive, aging [stereotypes](#) and attitudes of respect all play a part. But it's more than just about how younger people treat an older person, it's about how people interact."

Fingerman and Susan T. Charles, an associate professor of psychology and [social behavior](#) at the University of California in Irvine, published their research in this month's *Current Directions in [Psychological Science](#)*.

This article is based on their earlier work, including research showing that older adults are less confrontational than younger adults when they are upset. The article also builds on studies published in 2009 in the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* and in 2008 in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

One study compared [young adults](#), ages 22-35, and older adults, ages

65-77, by asking the participants to respond to several stories about personal interactions. The study participants heard stories about how an adult committed a social transgression, such as rudeness towards a waitress or ignoring property boundaries. Half the subjects read the story with the offending character portrayed as an older adult and the other half read the same story, but the offending character was portrayed as a younger adult. When the offending character was elderly, participants of all ages indicated that the person who was offended would avoid conflict and not react, but the opposite was found if the offending character was younger. When participants read a story in which a young adult committed a social faux pas, they thought other characters should confront that person and tell them they were upset.

These assumptions play out in daily interactions that Fingerman compares to a dance.

"Each person is acting and reacting in response to his or her partner, and, in this case, each partner is anticipating the next person's move, and that determination is often based on age," she said. "People vary their behavior with social partners depending on their age. When there is a negative interaction, younger people are generally more aggressive and confrontational than older people are. But younger people often are more accommodating to older people when there is a negative interaction."

For example, an older adult may be more cordial because of the assumption that a younger person may be confrontational. At the same time, the younger adult may conform to age stereotypes that indicate they should be more patient with an older person or they may hold stereotypes that older adults cannot change and do not attempt to change this person.

"Also, with age, people get better at regulating their emotions when something upsets them," Fingerman said. "The other advantage is that

older people often have more opportunity to select who they want to associate with because they are retired and do not go to work."

Other reasons for better treatment of [older adults](#) reflect care, concern and cherishing the moment. No matter the age, people are going to be more pleasant if they perceive that there is little time left in a relationship, Fingerman said. That applies not just to people who are elderly, but even young people who may not see each other because of life changes such as moving out of state or serving in the military. When time is limited, people want to make the most of their remaining interactions and enjoy the other person rather than spending time fighting.

"We've also seen this in studies when adult daughters don't want to confront their elderly mothers or discuss negative things with them because they feel there is little time left with them," Fingerman said.

Fingerman plans to study how the "need to respect one's elders" plays a role in other cultures. Her work is supported by the Department of Child Development and Family Studies.

Provided by Purdue University

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