

# Empathy and age: Middle-aged most likely to feel your pain

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According to a new study of more than 75,000 adults, women in that age group are more empathic than men of the same age and than younger or older people.

"Overall, late middle-aged [adults](#) were higher in both of the aspects of [empathy](#) that we measured," says Sara Konrath, co-author of an article on age and empathy forthcoming in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological and Social Sciences*.

"They reported that they were more likely to react emotionally to the experiences of others, and they were also more likely to try to understand how things looked from the perspective of others."

For the study, researchers Ed O'Brien, Konrath and Linda Hagen at the University of Michigan and Daniel Grühn at North Carolina State University analyzed data on empathy from three separate large samples of American adults, two of which were taken from the nationally representative [General Social Survey](#).

They found consistent evidence of an inverted U-shaped pattern of empathy across the adult life span, with younger and [older adults](#) reporting less empathy and middle-aged adults reporting more.

According to O'Brien, this pattern may result because increasing levels of [cognitive abilities](#) and experience improve emotional functioning during the first part of the adult life span, while cognitive declines

diminish emotional functioning in the second half.

But more research is needed in order to understand whether this pattern is really the result of an individual's age, or whether it is a generational effect reflecting the [socialization](#) of adults who are now in late [middle age](#).

"Americans born in the 1950s and '60s – the middle-aged people in our samples – were raised during historic [social movements](#), from civil rights to various antiwar countercultures," the authors explain. "It may be that today's middle-aged adults report higher empathy than other cohorts because they grew up during periods of important societal changes that emphasized the feelings and perspectives of other groups."

Earlier research by O'Brien, Konrath and colleagues found declines in empathy and higher levels of narcissism among young people today as compared to earlier generations of young adults.

O'Brien and Konrath plan to conduct additional research on empathy, to explore whether people can be trained to show more empathy using new electronic media, for example. "Given the fundamental role of empathy in everyday social life and its relationship to many important social activities such as volunteering and donating to charities, it's important to learn as much as we can about what factors increase and decrease empathic responding," says Konrath.

Provided by University of Michigan

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