

Senior moment? Stereotypes about aging can hurt older adults' memory, but there's an easy fix

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Of the many negative stereotypes that exist about older adults, the most common is that they are forgetful, senile and prone to so-called "senior moments." In fact, while cognitive processes do decline with age, simply reminding older adults about ageist ideas actually exacerbates their memory problems, reveals important new research from the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

The study, forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*, is an extension of the idea of "[stereotype threat](#)"—that when people are confronted with negative stereotypes about a group with which they identify, they tend to self-handicap and underperform compared to their potential. In doing so, they inadvertently confirm the negative stereotypes they were worried about in the first place.

The results highlight just how crucial it is for [older adults](#), as well as clinicians, to be aware of how ageist beliefs about older adults can affect older adults' real [memory test](#) performance.

"Older adults should be careful not to buy into [negative stereotypes](#) about aging—attributing every forgetful moment to getting older can actually worsen [memory problems](#)," said Sarah Barber, a [postdoctoral researcher](#) at the USC Davis School and lead author of the study.

However, there is a way to eliminate the problem, the study reveals: "No

one had yet examined the intriguing possibility that the mechanisms of stereotype threat vary according to age," Barber said.

Barber and her co-author Mara Mather, professor of gerontology and psychology at USC, conducted two experiments in which adults from the ages of 59 to 79 completed a memory test. Some participants were first asked to read [fake news](#) articles about memory loss in older adults, and others did not. Notably, the researchers structured the test so that half of the participants earned a monetary reward for each word they remembered; the other half lost money for each word they forgot.

In past tests, 70 percent of older adults met diagnostic criteria for dementia when examined under stereotype threat, compared to approximately 14 percent when not assessed under threat.

But the latest research shows that stereotype threat can actually improve older adults' performance on memory tests, under certain conditions.

For participants who had something to gain, being confronted with age stereotypes meant poorer performance on memory tests. They scored about 20 percent worse than people who were not exposed to the stereotype.

But when the test was framed in terms of preventing losses due to forgetting, the results flipped: participants reminded of the stereotypes about aging and [memory loss](#) actually scored better than those who were under no stereotype threat.

"Stereotype threat is generally thought to be a bad thing, and it is well established that it can impair older adults' memory performance. However, our experiments demonstrate that stereotype threat can actually enhance older adults' memory if the task involves avoiding losses," Barber said.

Older adults, it seems, respond to stereotype threat by changing their motivational priorities and focusing more on avoiding mistakes. The study is part of a critical body of work on risk taking and decision making among older adults from the USC Davis School of Gerontology, named for AARP founder Leonard Davis and the leading research center in the world on aging and its biological, psychological, political and economic dimensions.

"Our experiments suggest an easy intervention to eliminate the negative effects of stereotype threat on older adults—clinicians should simply change the test instructions to emphasize the importance of not making mistakes," Barber said.

Provided by University of Southern California

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