

More experiences make people less empathetic to the inexperienced, study finds

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(Medical Xpress)—Children may actually be right when they lament that their parents don't understand their problems.

New research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business finds that the more [experiences](#) a person has, the harder it is for them to empathize with those who have less experience.

"The big take-away from our research is just because at one time you went to your first concert or had your first heartbreak doesn't mean you'll know how someone else will experience their first concert or heartbreak," said Troy Campbell, author of the study and a Ph.D. student at Fuqua. "For instance, parents don't understand what it's like to be a teenager, because they don't feel the things teenagers feel anymore."

Campbell and colleagues conducted five experiments that subjected volunteers to shocking images, jokes and annoying noises, things designed to make an impression.

For instance, in one experiment, the researchers repeatedly showed a single photo of Lady Gaga to two groups. One group repeatedly saw a photo of her in a sexy leather outfit. Another repeatedly saw a photo of her dressed only in crime scene tape. Both groups were later shown both of the images and asked which image would be more shocking to first-time viewers.

The volunteers predicted that others would be less shocked by whichever

photo they had personally been repeatedly exposed to. They incorrectly concluded that how they felt after repeated exposure to the images would be how others would feel upon first seeing the images.

"As a fan of Lady Gaga, I always found it fascinating how shocked people were by Lady Gaga. I would show them her videos and photos and they'd find the content shocking and offensive," Campbell said. "So I did a study on this. And what I found was that the more exposure to Lady Gaga one has, the less shocking one finds her but also the less shocking they think others will find her, even if they know others have much less exposure to her."

In another experiment, volunteers were told to repeatedly write the same funny joke. After doing so five times, they rated the joke as less funny than those who wrote it just once. Those who copied it five times also said that others would find it less funny than did the volunteers who copied the joke only once, and they were also less likely to share the joke with others.

Campbell said these experiments indicate that people may be unable to detach from their current feelings, making it harder to relate to others who are going through an event for the first time. "We all assume that those people with experience are the perfect guides, but when it comes to emotional items like music, jokes and pain, they can be quite biased by their experiences," he said. "Empathy is hard to begin with, and too much experience can make it even harder."

More information: "Too much experience: A desensitization bias in emotional perspective taking." Campbell, Troy; O'Brien, Ed; Van Boven, Leaf; Schwarz, Norbert; Ubel, Peter. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 106(2), Feb 2014, 272-285. [DOI: 10.1037/a0035148](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035148)

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