

# Older adults have their own perspectives on sadness, loneliness and serenity

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In a recent study, Ready found that older adults report feeling more serenity than younger people, and have a richer concept of what it means to feel serene than younger people. Credit: UMass Amherst

A new study led by associate professor Rebecca Ready in the department of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has found that older adults have different, more positive responses than young adults about feelings such as serenity, sadness and loneliness.

Ready calls the findings "highly clinically significant" because the information could help caregivers, psychotherapists and workers at assisted living facilities, for example, better understand the emotions of [older people](#) in their care, which could lead to improved treatment and quality of interactions. Findings appear in the current online issue of *Aging and Mental Health*.

She says, "Older adults report feeling more serenity than younger persons. They also have a richer concept of what it means to feel serene than younger persons." In a word grouping task, older adults associated more positive emotional terms with serene, such as cheerful, happy and joyful, than did younger people. The authors speculate that "this broader conception of serene" is associated with the fact that older adults report more calming positive emotions than younger people.

She adds, "We were surprised to find that [younger adults](#) associated more self-deprecating terms with feeling sad and lonely, such as being ashamed or disgusted with themselves, than [older persons](#)." When grouping other emotion words with sadness, older adults included words such as droopy and sheepish, while younger adults included more self-deprecating terms with the word, such as dissatisfied with self, ashamed, angry and disgusted with self. A similar pattern was observed for lonely.

For this study, Ready and her graduate student Gennarina Santorelli recruited 32 older adults ages 60 to 92, and 111 younger adults ages 18 to 32, and asked them to judge 70 emotion terms on whether the words had a positive or negative connotation and if the words were activating or arousing. For example, excited is generally rated as a high activation word, while serene is associated with less activation. They then had participants group similar words together.

Ready and colleagues found the word groupings were similar between older and younger persons for many words but they noted systematic

differences for sadness, loneliness and, as noted above, serenity. They also found that older adults perceive emotion terms as most positive and more active than younger persons. Emotions overall may be more stimulating for older than younger persons.

The older adults in this study reported fewer depressive symptoms than the younger participants. Controlling for age group differences in these symptoms, Ready says, "We gained a deeper appreciation of some relatively unknown benefits of aging, such as increased [positive emotions](#) and less shame associated with feeling sad or lonely."

As the percentage of older adults in the United States increases, Ready says, "It is imperative to determine how older adults define emotions differently than younger adults. These data ensure effective communication with [older adults](#), accurate understanding of their emotion experiences, and appropriate access to psychological interventions."

**More information:** Rebecca E. Ready et al. Judgment and classification of emotion terms by older and younger adults, *Aging & Mental Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2016.1150415](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2016.1150415)

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