

# Memory may aid emotion regulation, particularly in older adults

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In a study exploring the relationship between memory for specific past experiences and recovery from strong negative emotions, University of Massachusetts Amherst research psychologists report that episodic memory may be more important in helping midlife and older adults recover from a negative event than it is for younger adults.

Rebecca Ready, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences, and her graduate student Gennarina Santorelli point out that until now, no studies with older adults have investigated associations between episodic [memory](#) performance, that is recalling past experiences rooted in a specific time and place, and what is known as "emotion recovery," the return to a normal state of emotion after an emotional event.

They say results suggest that "stronger memory may facilitate emotion recovery and this may be particularly true for older adults." Further, "older adults with [memory impairment](#) may be at risk for emotion dysregulation." Details appear in the current issue of *Experimental Aging Research*.

As Ready explains, cognitive and emotional processes are closely interconnected, and this may be particularly true for older adults. She adds, "older adults with stronger scores on cognitive tasks have advantages in regulating their emotions."

For this study, she and Santorelli asked 23 younger adults 19-23 years old and 21 midlife and older adults 52-79 years old to complete a

questionnaire about their momentary emotions before watching a 12-minute montage of four movie clips portraying interpersonal loss. Immediately after viewing the sad video montage and again after a brief recovery period, participants reported on their emotions in the moment.

The four clips were from the films "Up," "Steel Magnolias," "Sophie's Choice" and "Pay It Forward." Each pertains to a different kind of personal loss and evokes a broad range of emotional responses in viewers. In this study, participants reacted with greater feelings of sadness and hostility, as well as decreased feelings of joviality, which is characterized by a cheerful and friendly mood.

To measure participants' memory for film clip details, particularly visual images, the researchers showed them 15 still photos, five from the videos and 10 from other videos. Participants also answered questions about events that happened in the videos.

Ready and Santorelli were particularly interested in "emotion recovery" after the end of the film montage. For example, they were interested in how much feelings of sadness declined back to normal after the films ended.

They report, "Participants with better memory for details about the films recovered more thoroughly from the mood induction than participants with lower scores," and age moderated the association between recovery and memory. There was a significantly stronger, positive association between better memory and recovering feelings of joviality among midlife and older adults compared to younger adults.

Recovery of positive emotions following the sad film were more strongly associated with better memory for the film stimuli in midlife and older adults than in younger adults.

Ready says this finding is consistent with converging evidence that cognitive resources are used differently by older adults than [younger adults](#) in the service of emotion processing and [emotion regulation](#) during laboratory tasks.

She adds, "It is unclear why recovery in negative emotions was not moderated by age as predicted. The lack of effects here may be a consequence of the small sample and/or an indication that positive emotion recovery is a better index of effective emotion regulation than negative emotion recovery. Future work is necessary to explore these ideas."

The researchers say this work is innovative because an association between memory skills and emotion recovery was discovered in persons across the adult lifespan with normal-range cognition. Further, memory may be more strongly associated with emotion regulation outcomes for midlife and older adults than younger persons, particularly in service of positive emotion recovery from a negative stimulus. Replicating this finding and more thorough exploration of recovery in [negative emotions](#) is warranted, particularly with a larger and more diverse sample. This future research should examine midlife and older adults separately.

Also, Ready says that future research should determine if memory impairment in older adults is associated with emotion dysregulation and incomplete recovery from negative experiences. Understanding the origin of emotion dysregulation in [older adults](#) with memory impairment may lead to effective interventions to improve emotion outcomes. Finally, future work should pursue alternative explanations for the associations between poorer memory and less efficient emotion regulation, such as feelings of discouragement after memory testing.

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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