

Risk of oversharing in conversation increases with age, study says

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The risk of oversharing in conversation - or providing a listener with too much irrelevant detail - increases as we age, research suggests.

Tests carried out on a group of 100 people show the thinking [skills](#) that influence how we respond to people's points of view deteriorate with age.

Linguists used a series of computerised listening and visual tests to assess thinking skills in the group, whose ages ranged from 17 to 84 years old.

The team tested how participants' attention skills - the ability to concentrate on one thing and ignore another - influenced their ability to consider a partner's perspective in conversation.

The researchers, from The University of Edinburgh and Northwestern University in Illinois, completed two listening tests to assess two types of attention skills.

Firstly, they tracked inhibition - the ability to focus and ignore distracting [information](#).

Then they monitored switching - the ability to shift focus between two different sounds and filter relevant information.

Researchers asked participants to describe one of four objects to a partner who could only see three of the objects. The researchers found older participants were more likely to mention details about the hidden object, revealing [irrelevant information](#) to their partner.

The team found an [age-related decline](#) in attention switching skills, and that this ability determined how [older adults](#) responded to their [partner's](#) perspective.

For younger adults, their ability to filter distracting information was what determined their ability to consider others' perspectives more effectively.

Lead researcher Madeleine Long, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, said: "The study identified two attentional functions that influence whether we consider another's point of view and how that changes as we age. This is particularly important for older adults who are more susceptible to revealing private information.

"We hope these findings can be used to design targeted training that helps older adults improve these skills and avoid embarrassing and potential risky communicative errors."

More information: Madeleine R. Long et al. Individual differences in switching and inhibition predict perspective-taking across the lifespan, *Cognition* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2017.09.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2017.09.004)

Provided by University of Edinburgh

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