

New insights into the relationship between how we feel and our views on aging

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A new study finds that the disconnect between how old we feel and how old we want to be can offer insights into the relationship between our views on aging and our health.

Subjective age discordance (SAD) – the difference between how old you feel and how old you would like to be—is a fairly new concept in the psychology of aging. However, the work to this point has used SAD to look at longitudinal data and how people's views on aging evolve over months or years.

"We wanted to see whether SAD could help us assess day-to-day changes in our views on aging, and how that may relate to our [physical health](#) and well-being," says Shevaun Neupert, co-author of the study and a professor of psychology at North Carolina State University.

SAD is determined by taking how old you feel, subtracting how old you would like to be and then dividing it by your actual age. The higher the score, the more you feel older than you want to be.

For this study, researchers enrolled 116 adults aged 60-90 and 107 adults aged 18-36. Study participants filled out an [online survey](#) every day for eight days. The survey was designed to assess how old participants felt each day, their ideal age, their positive and negative mood over the course of the day, any stresses they experienced, and any physical complaints, such as backaches or cold symptoms.

"We found that both older adults and younger adults experienced SAD," Neupert says. "It was more pronounced in [older adults](#), which makes sense. However, it fluctuated more from day to day in younger adults, which was interesting."

"We think younger adults are getting pushed and pulled more," says Jennifer Bellintier, first author of the paper, and a researcher at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. "Younger adults are concerned about negative stereotypes associated with aging, but may also be dealing with [negative stereotypes](#) associated with younger generations and wishing they had some of the privileges and status associated with being older."

Two additional findings stood out.

"On days when the age you feel is closer to your ideal age, people tend to have a more positive mood," Bellintier says. "And, on average, people who have more [health](#) complaints also had higher SAD scores."

Neither finding was surprising, but both show the value of the SAD concept as a tool for understanding people's views on age and aging. It may also offer a new approach for the way we think about aging and its impacts on health.

"Previous research has found that how old you feel can affect your physical and mental well-being, and interventions to address that have focused on trying to make people feel younger," Neupert says.

"That approach is problematic, in that it effectively encourages ageism," says Bellingtier. "Our findings in this study suggest that another approach to improving well-being would be to find ways to reduce this subjective age discordance. In other words, instead of telling people to feel young, we could help people by encouraging them to raise their 'ideal' age."

The paper, "Daily Experiences of Subjective Age Discordance and Well-Being," is published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

More information: Jennifer A. Bellingtier et al, Daily experiences of subjective age discordance and well-being., *Psychology and Aging* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000621](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000621)

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