

Older people experience more positive and fewer negative emotions during the pandemic

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Getting old is usually seen as unappealing, but aging in fact has some positive effects. One of the advantages of getting old is feeling better. Older people generally experience more positive and fewer negative emotions than younger people. In a new study published in *Psychological Science*, Rui Sun and Disa Sauter from the University of Amsterdam tested whether this advantage of older people would also hold during the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that even during the difficult conditions of this crisis, older people are on average emotionally better off than younger people.

The Covid19 pandemic is a major challenge for both physical and mental health. The situation is especially difficult for [older people](#), who are at greater risk from the virus. Psychology researchers Rui Sun and Disa Sauter wanted to test whether older [people](#), who generally experience more positive and fewer negative emotions than [younger people](#), would still have this advantage during the pandemic. "This can help us understand the [emotional reactions](#) of older and younger people during the extraordinary times of a pandemic," explain Sun and Sauter, "but it can also inform us about likely reactions to other kinds of stressful experiences."

Worldwide older people experienced more positive emotions than younger people

In a first study, the researchers collected data in a large-scale survey with 23,350 people during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, people were sampled across 63 different countries, nearly one-third of the countries in the world. Sun and Sauter asked people to report their recent experiences of 10 different positive emotions (admiration, calm, compassion, determination, moved, gratitude, hope, love, relief, and pleasure) and 10 different negative emotions (anger, anxiety, boredom, confusion, disgust, fear, frustration, loneliness, regret,

and sadness).

The researchers found that older people experienced more positive and fewer negative emotions than younger people, even during the pandemic. This result was remarkably consistent across countries. "Our results show that the advantage that older people have in their [emotional](#) experiences exists across cultures, and that it holds across countries that are very different, also in terms of the severity of the pandemic during our data collection," the authors note.

Comparing before and during the pandemic

In a second study, Sun and Sauter directly compared a nationally representative sample of 4,370 people before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study made use of a Dutch longitudinal project in which the same people are tested every year (the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences: LISS). In this study too, people were asked to report their experiences of different negative and positive emotions. The researchers found that older people experienced more positive and fewer [negative emotions](#) than younger people, but this difference was smaller during the pandemic.

Sun and Sauter link the advantage in emotional experience of older adults to a theory that states that older people are better at avoiding situations that are likely to make them feel bad. "This is generally an effective strategy for feeling better during non-pandemic conditions, but the pandemic has limited everyone's options in their actions," explain the authors. "This might explain why the advantage for older adults was reduced during the pandemic. Older people had less possibility to opt into situations that they wanted to be in, and to opt out of situations they didn't want to be in."

The researchers conclude that, taken together, these results highlight the

resilience of older people. Even during the difficult conditions of a [pandemic](#), older people are on average emotionally better off than younger people. "This points to older adults being able to utilize some strategies and resources that help ameliorate even sustained stress, such as avoiding negative situations," the authors conclude.

More information: Rui Sun et al, Sustained Stress Reduces the Age Advantages in Emotional Experience of Older Adults: Commentary on Carstensen et al. (2020), *Psychological Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976211052476](#)

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