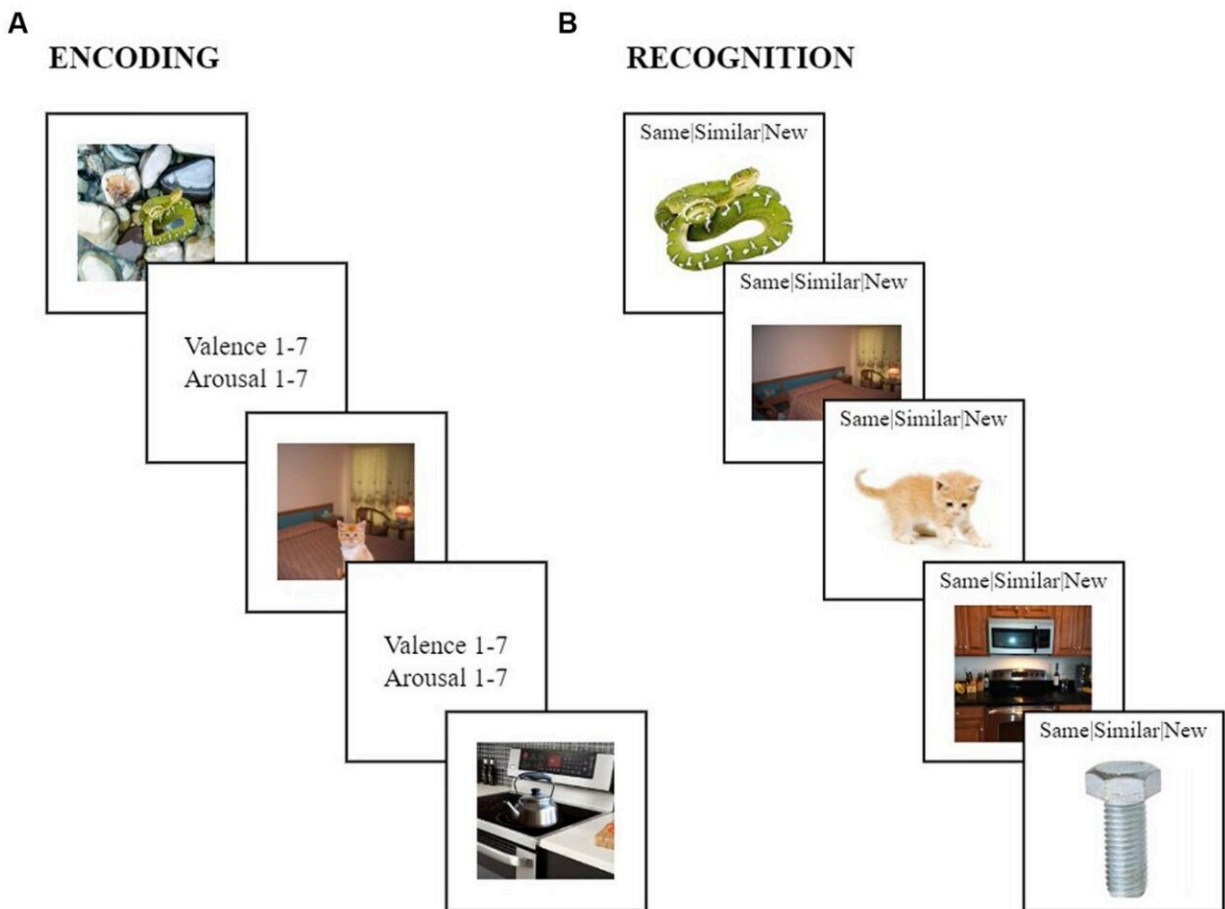


Study hints at an early shift towards a more positive attitude in middle-aged people

February 14 2024, by Ingrid Fadelli



The emotional memory trade-off task. (A) During encoding, participants viewed a series of negative (e.g., a vicious looking snake on wet pebbles), positive (e.g., a cute kitten on a bed) and neutral scenes (e.g., a kettle on a kitchen stove), consisting of objects with negative, positive, or neutral valences always placed on a neutral background. Participants rated the valence and arousal levels of each scene on a scale from one to seven. (B) During recognition, participants

indicated whether each scene component was "same" (e.g., the same snake exactly matched what has been viewed during encoding), "similar" (e.g., the similar kitten shared the same verbal label as the kitten during encoding but differed in specific visual details), or "new" (e.g., the bolt was new and was not seen during encoding). Credit: *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* (2024). DOI: 10.3389/fnbeh.2024.1342589

Past psychology studies have found that on average, older adults tend to view the world in a more positive light than younger adults. People in their 30s to 50s, in fact, often display a negativity bias, which essentially means that they are more prone to remember unfavorable and information interpret neutral events in a negative light.

As they age, on the other hand, humans appear to prioritize positive information, despite the cognitive deficits that often emerge in older age. For example, studies have found that healthy older adults tend to prefer looking at [happy faces](#) compared to fearful facial expressions and are also more likely to remember positive information.

Researchers at University of Notre Dame recently set out to further investigate this shift towards greater positivity observed in late adult life. Their findings, [published](#) in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, suggest that the previously observed changes towards greater positivity could start earlier than anticipated, specifically at midlife.

"While younger adults are more likely to attend to, process, and remember negative relative to positive information, healthy older adults show the opposite pattern," Xinran Niu, Mia F. Utayde and their colleagues wrote in their paper. "The current study evaluates when, exactly, this positivity shift begins and how it influences memory performance for positive, negative, and neutral information."

As part of their study, Niu, Utayde and their colleagues carried out a series of experiments involving 274 [healthy adults](#), which were categorized in three distinct age groups: middle-aged (35-47 years old), late middle-aged (48-59 years old) and older adults (

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