

Study: Peer pressure susceptibility lasts into adulthood

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The term "peer pressure" is often linked to the experiences of children or teenagers in extreme situations. One University of Texas at Dallas researcher wondered if adults continue to succumb to similar pressures

of social conformity in everyday situations.

Dr. Kendra Seaman, assistant professor of psychology in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences (BBS), and her colleagues recently examined the battle between [self-control](#) and [peer pressure](#) in the over-18 crowd.

In a [study](#) published in *Psychology and Aging*, the researchers asked 157 adults ages 18 to 80 to respond to randomly timed surveys via [text message](#) in order to monitor participants' self-control over spontaneous desires in daily life.

The researchers found that the influence of peer pressure continues into early adulthood, while middle-aged and [older adults](#) are better at controlling their desires.

Seaman, the senior author of the study and director of the Aging Well Lab at the Center for Vital Longevity at UT Dallas, said that susceptibility to peer pressure had been thought to peak in adolescence and gradually disappear in early adulthood.

"Most existing theories suggest that once you're an adult, you're good at resisting urges," she said. "But we don't know when or how people get there in early adulthood, and we don't know how it develops across adulthood."

While older people generally regulate emotions more effectively, indicating greater self-control and resistance to conformity pressures, Seaman said they also face a new set of priorities that might make it more difficult to resist such influences, especially as they observe their peers partaking.

"As we age, the dilemmas we face change," she said. "Should I have a

slice of chocolate cake at my niece's birthday party if I'm trying to lose weight? Should I grab an expensive latte with co-workers if I'm trying to save money?"

Study participants were asked if they had experienced a craving or desire in the last three hours. If they said yes, there were follow-up questions: Did the desire conflict with personal goals, such as healthy living or saving money? Were other people around them during this event? Did they follow the urge to participate? They were also asked to judge the scale of both the urge and the conflict.

Results showed that when desires were experienced in the presence of others enacting that desire, middle-aged and older adults were better at controlling their desires than younger adults.

"While we all know that there is a steep developmental curve for self-control during adolescence, that's not the end of the story," Seaman said. "Consistent with other studies on emotion regulation improving with age, these results indicate that resistance to social-conformity pressure grows across the adult lifespan,"

Seaman said the research addressed largely unexplored facets of peer pressure.

"Almost all of the studies done on adolescents focus on risky activities: binge drinking, unprotected sex, and so on," she said. "This study is about much more mundane urges: having a glass of wine or checking social media, for instance."

The study also focused on immediate memories, which are more reliable than recollections of experiences.

"Other studies have asked people to think across the last week, month or

year," she said. "We're removing that long-term memory component and only doing experience sampling, asking about events in the last three hours, capturing people as they go about their day."

Social conformity and self-control across adult life is a relatively new frontier in human behavior research, Seaman said.

"Our results reveal that adult age-related differences partially explain sensitivity to social-conformity pressure in real-world self-control decisions. Younger adults are less successful at regulating desires when others are around enacting those desires," she said. "While other studies suggest that this influence nearly disappears after late adolescence, we find it here—though more limited—in young adulthood and even in [middle age](#)."

More information: Jaime J. Castellon et al, Adult age-related differences in susceptibility to social conformity pressures in self-control over daily desires., *Psychology and Aging* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000790](#)

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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