

# Researchers find older folks don't get the joke

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It's no laughing matter that older adults have a tougher time understanding basic jokes than do younger adults.

It's partially due to a cognitive decline associated with age, according to Washington University in St. Louis researchers Wingyun Mak, a graduate student in psychology in Arts & Sciences, and Brian Carpenter, Ph.D. , Washington University associate professor of psychology.

Humor comprehension in older adults functions in a different fashion than humor comprehension in younger adults. The researchers studied older adults from a university subject pool as well as undergraduate students. The subjects participated in tests that indicated their ability to complete jokes accurately as well as tests that indicated their cognitive capabilities in areas of abstract reasoning, short - term memory, and cognitive flexibility. Overall, older adults demonstrated lower performance on both tests of cognitive ability as well as tests of humor comprehension than did younger adults.

“However, just because you're an older adult does not mean that you can't understand humor. All hope is not lost,” said Mak. “This is just the first step in understanding how humor comprehension functions in older adults.” There are likely a multitude of factors, like previous experiences, preferences, and personality that also contribute to how well someone understands different types of humor.

The hope would be that this study and future research would allow

researchers to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between cognition and humor comprehension. Perhaps down the line, this knowledge may inform the way humor is integrated into programs targeted at improving the quality of life for older adults.

The paper, published in the *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, was based on the theory that humor comprehension is a result of resolving incongruities—resolving the conflict between the expected and the actual, which requires a combination of cognitive skills. As older adults age, they experience cognitive declines that the researchers indicate affect their ability to comprehend humor.

## **Duh, I don't get it**

The measure used, the Joke and Story Completion Test, was developed by Hiram Brownell in 1983. A joke stem was presented with four different endings including the correct humorous ending; a humorous nonsequitur—an ending that does not make sense with the joke stem but is funny in and of itself; an unhumorous straightforward answer; and an unhumorous, unrelated nonsequitur. The correct “funny” answer required that the participant integrate the three different cognitive measures tested in the study—abstract reasoning, short-term memory, and cognitive flexibility.

Previous researchers have attributed some of the age-related deficits in humor comprehension to deficits in frontal lobe-mediated abilities. Mak and Carpenter's research supports this claim.

In addition, Mak and Carpenter added an element previously untested in humor comprehension studies—they included both a nonverbal joke completion test that structurally mirrored the verbal joke completion measure, allowing them to compare between the nonverbal and verbal

completion tests.

Laughter is a physical activity—it burns calories, strengthens abdominal muscles, and boosts the immune system, among other benefits. Although they did not study the specific benefits of laughter and humor, it has been well documented that, as Mak said, “It can’t hurt your physical state to be able to understand humor.”

Laughter also has sociological benefits and plays a role in building and maintaining relationships. Thus, many older adult day services and programs incorporate humor as a way to improve both physical and psychological aspects of participants’ lives.

The idea that humor can help older adults cope with life - changing events is not a new one, but relatively unstudied by researchers. “The holy grail is, of course, humor appreciation. Understanding how humor comprehension works in older adults is the first step in this process,” said Carpenter.

## **Humor comprehension, not humor appreciation**

Previous work has looked at humor appreciation and humor comprehension simultaneously. Mak and Carpenter strove to study only the aspect of comprehension in hopes of understanding the step that occurs before one can appreciate humor.

“Humor is a big part of enjoying life and everyday relationships,” Mak said.

Understanding the relationship between humor comprehension and cognition may eventually facilitate the way humor is integrated into programs or therapies for older adults.

So when your grandparents or older relatives say that they “just don’t understand” your movies or your favorite comedians, there may be more at work than just generational differences in what they as appreciate as “funny.”

They legitimately may not get the jokes. That being said, researchers are just beginning to “tease” out ways to prevent cognitive decline in older adults, and hopefully one day grandchildren and their grandparents will be able to giggle at the same bad jokes. Appreciating the same comedian is a whole other can of peanut brittle filled with fake snakes.

Source: Washington University in St. Louis

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