Experiencing major stress makes some older adults better able to handle daily stress

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Dealing with a major stressful event appears to make some older adults better able to cope with the ups and downs of day-to-day stress, according to new research from North Carolina State University.

"Our study tells us that there's no expiration date on the impact of life-changing, stressful events," says Shevaun Neupert, an associate professor

of psychology and co-author of a paper on the work. "And the study tells us that many people actually weather these major stressors and emerge more resilient and less easily influenced by daily stresses."

And these major stressors can be good or bad, such as getting married, retiring or losing a loved one.

"Previous studies had only evaluated an individual's response to either major stressful events or to daily stress," says Jennifer Bellingtier, a Ph.D. candidate at NC State and lead author of the paper. "We've found that these things need to be viewed in tandem in order to capture the complex ways that people respond to both kinds of stress."

For the study, researchers had 43 adults between the ages of 60 and 96 fill out a daily questionnaire for eight consecutive days. At the beginning of the study, each participant was asked about any major stressful events they'd experienced in the previous year. The daily questionnaire asked participants about any stress they'd experienced that day, as well as three questions related to age: how old they felt, how old they would like to be and how old they thought they looked.

The results showed that people who had experienced major stressors responded differently to daily stress than people who had not experienced such stressful life events.

Study participants who hadn't had a major life stressor in the past year were more likely to feel significantly older on stressful days, but participants who had experienced a major stressor were less likely to fluctuate in how old they felt on a day-to-day basis.

"They were much more stable in response to day-to-day stress," Bellingtier says.

This resilience extended to people's views on how old they looked.

On days that weren't stressful, both groups of participants thought they looked approximately 10 years younger than their actual age. But there was an unexpected difference on stressful days. Participants who had experienced a major stressor thought they looked more than 20 years younger on stressful days - while people who had not experienced a major stressor thought they looked their actual age (i.e., they thought they looked 10 years older than they usually did).

This trend did not extend to how old study participants wished they were. Unsurprisingly, all of the study participants wished they were younger. But people who had experienced a major stressor wanted to be much younger on stressful days - whether compared to themselves on non-stressful days or to study participants who hadn't experienced a stressful life event.

"We are now considering how people's attitudes about their aging (i.e., feeling positive or negative about changes related to aging) influence an individual's response to stressors," Bellingtier says. "We see aging attitudes as comparable to major life-event stressors, in that they may function as important background factors that impact how individuals respond to stressors. Our preliminary findings indicate that individuals with more negative attitudes respond with more intense negative feelings following a stressor."

More information: The paper, "The Combined Effects of Daily Stressors and Major Life Events on Daily Subjective Ages," will be published Nov. 18 in the *Journal of Gerontology*: *Psychological Sciences*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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