

Good attitudes about aging help seniors handle stress

August 3 2016



Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

New research from North Carolina State University finds that having a positive attitude about aging makes older adults more resilient when faced with stressful situations.

"There has been a lot of research on how [older adults](#) respond to stress, but the findings have been mixed: some studies have found that older

adults are less resilient than [younger adults](#) at responding to stress; some have found that they're more resilient; and some have found no difference," says Jennifer Bellingtier, a Ph.D. student at NC State and lead author of a paper describing the work. "We wanted to see whether attitudes toward aging could account for this disparity in research findings. In other words, are older adults with [positive attitudes](#) about aging more resilient than older adults with [negative attitudes](#)?"

The answer is yes.

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, participants were asked about their attitudes toward aging. For example, participants were asked if they felt they were as useful now as they had been when they were younger, and whether they were as happy as when they were younger.

The daily questionnaire asked participants about any stress they'd experienced that day, as well as the extent to which they experienced negative emotions, such as fear, irritability or distress.

The researchers also accounted for the personality of [study participants](#). Were they optimistic and upbeat about everything, or are there benefits tied specifically to an individual's attitudes about aging?

"We found that people in the study who had more positive attitudes toward aging were more resilient in response to stress - meaning that there wasn't a significant increase in [negative emotions](#)," Bellingtier says. "Meanwhile, study participants with more negative attitudes toward aging showed a sharp increase in negative emotional affect on stressful days."

"This tells us that the way we think about aging has very real

consequences for how we respond to difficult situations when we're older," says Shevaun Neupert, an associate professor of psychology at NC State and senior author on the paper. "That affects our quality of life and may also have health ramifications. For example, more adverse emotional responses to stress have been associated with increased cardiovascular health risks."

"Our findings are likely applicable to other Americans, but it's not clear to what extent the findings would be relevant elsewhere," Bellingtier says. "Attitudes toward aging vary widely across cultures, and more work would need to be done to determine the importance of aging [attitudes](#) in other settings."

More information: The paper, "Negative aging attitudes predict greater reactivity to daily stressors in older adults," will be published online on Aug. 3 in the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*. DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbw086

Provided by North Carolina State University

Citation: Good attitudes about aging help seniors handle stress (2016, August 3) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-good-attitudes-aging-seniors-stress.html>

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