

Anger more harmful to health of older adults than sadness

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Credit: David Shankbone/Wikipedia

Anger may be more harmful to an older person's physical health than sadness, potentially increasing inflammation, which is associated with such chronic illnesses as heart disease, arthritis and cancer, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"As most people age, they simply cannot do the activities they once did, or they may experience the loss of a spouse or a decline in their physical mobility and they can become angry," said Meaghan A. Barlow, MA, of Concordia University, lead author of the study, which was published in *Psychology and Aging*. "Our study showed that anger can lead to the development of [chronic illnesses](#), whereas sadness did not."

Barlow and her co-authors examined whether anger and sadness contributed to inflammation, an immune response by the body to perceived

threats, such as infection or tissue damage. While inflammation in general helps protect the body and assists in healing, long-lasting inflammation can lead to chronic illnesses in old age, according to the authors.

The researchers collected and analyzed data from 226 [older adults](#) ages 59 to 93 from Montreal. They grouped participants as being in early old age, 59 to 79 years old, or advanced old age, 80 years old and older.

Over one week, participants completed short questionnaires about how angry or sad they felt. The authors also measured inflammation from [blood samples](#) and asked participants if they had any age-related chronic illnesses.

"We found that experiencing anger daily was related to higher levels of inflammation and chronic illness for people 80 years old and older, but not for younger seniors," said study co-author Carsten Wrosch, Ph.D., also of Concordia University. "Sadness, on the other hand, was not related to inflammation or chronic illness."

Sadness may help older seniors adjust to challenges such as age-related physical and cognitive declines because it can help them disengage from goals that are no longer attainable, said Barlow.

This study showed that not all [negative emotions](#) are inherently bad and can be beneficial under certain circumstances, she explained.

"Anger is an energizing emotion that can help motivate people to pursue life goals," said Barlow. "Younger seniors may be able to use that anger as fuel to overcome life's challenges and emerging age-related losses and that can keep them healthier. Anger becomes problematic for adults once they reach 80 years old, however, because that is when many experience irreversible losses

and some of life's pleasures fall out of reach."

The authors suggested that education and therapy may help older adults reduce anger by regulating their emotions or by offering better coping strategies to manage the inevitable changes that accompany aging.

"If we better understand which negative emotions are harmful, not harmful or even beneficial to [older people](#), we can teach them how to cope with loss in a healthy way," said Barlow. "This may help them let go of their [anger](#)."

More information: "Is Anger, but Not Sadness, Associated With Chronic Inflammation and Illness in Older Adulthood?" by Meaghan A. Barlow, MA, Carsten Wrosch, PhD, Jean-Philippe Gouin, PhD, Concordia University, and Ute Kunzmann, PhD, University of Leipzig. *Psychology and Aging*. Published May 9, 2019.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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