

Mood Affects Young and Old Differently, Study Finds

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The effect of mood on how people process information changes greatly as they age, suggests new research from the Georgia Institute of Technology. The study, which offers a window into the changing nature of the aging mind and the way it handles emotion and information, appears in the latest edition of the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Researchers from Georgia Tech's School of Psychology's Adult Development lab examined how younger and older adults who were induced into a positive or negative mood interpreted the actions of others. They found that older adults who were induced into a negative mood were more likely than younger adults to attribute the actions of an individual to that person alone, rather than considering that situational factors may be affecting their actions. This correspondence bias suggests that, when in a negative mood, older adults are more internally focused on maintaining an emotionally satisfying experience and thus have difficulty processing external information.

"It may be the case that older adults in a negative mood state are more motivated to downgrade their negative emotions and, thus, not allocate enough processing time to focus on the details of the situation. So this needs to be taken into consideration when imparting information to older adults," said Fredda Blanchard-Fields, professor in Georgia Tech's School of Psychology.

One situation where this knowledge might be useful is when a doctor has to tell a patient they have a serious illness.

"You want to give them time to deal with the fact that they have the illness, to deal with the emotions before you have them make a decision on how to treat it," she said.

That's very different from the way young people handle information. When in a negative mood, young adults were more likely to consider situational factors when assessing an individual's behavior, the study found. Younger adults may not have the same motivational tendencies and thus can tolerate negative emotions more easily and focus on the details of the task. This suggests that they are more externally focused when in a negative mood.

Researchers recruited 97 young adults between 18 and 28 years of age and 94 older adults whose ages ranged between 59-80 years. Participants in the study viewed film clips designed to induce them into either a positive, negative or neutral mood. Once they completed a test that measured their mood, they were given a test to measure their attention to detail and working memory capacity. Finally, they were given an essay and asked to assess whether they thought the opinions in the essay were forced or the result of the writer's own choosing.

When in a negative mood, older adults were more likely than younger adults to assume that the actions of the essay writer reflected a true belief, despite the fact that the writer had no choice in which belief to advocate.

"We thought that this was because the older adults were not focusing on the essay, not focusing on the instructions," said Andy Mienaltowski, graduate researcher and lead author of the study. "Instead, they were focusing on their negative mood state, their emotional state that they had been put in before they read the essay."

These findings seem to support other research suggesting that as people

age, they become more interested in regulating their emotions and eliminating negativity.

"Older adults may be captured by the negativity and, therefore, focus attention on emotion regulation," said Blanchard-Fields. "Therefore, they focus attention on emotion regulation rather than focusing attention on the details that they need to internalize. So it's a dual task for them."

When positive moods were induced, the roles were reversed. This time, the younger adults were more likely to be less focused and exhibit the correspondence bias, and the older adults were detail oriented and considered other factors when explaining the writer's essay.

"Here we see that younger people tend to become more lax and lose focus; whereas, older people are more likely to focus on the task they are completing," said Mienaltowski.

"So it shows that the young and old are motivated by different goals and, therefore, perceive and process information differently because of the changes in goals across the lifespan," said Blanchard-Fields.

The next study for the research team will be comparing the effects of negative mood on cognition in younger and older adults.

Source: Georgia Institute of Technology

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