

Stereotypes around aging can negatively impact memory and hearing

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

A study led by researchers at the University of Toronto shows that when older adults feel negatively about aging, they may lack confidence in their abilities to hear and remember things, and perform poorly at both.

"People's feelings about getting older influence their sensory and cognitive functions," said Alison Chasteen, professor in U of T's Department of Psychology and lead author of the study published in *Psychology and Aging*. "Those feelings are often rooted in stereotypes about getting older and comments made by those around them that their hearing and memory are failing. So, we need to take a deeper and broader approach to understanding the factors that influence their daily lives."

In the study, the researchers examined three variables - views on aging, self-perceptions of one's [abilities](#) to hear and remember, and one's actual performance of both functions - to uncover connections between them. It marks the first time all three factors were studied together using the same group of subjects.

A sample of 301 adults between the ages of 56 and 96 completed standard hearing tests to determine their ability to hear. These were followed by a series of recall tasks to test their memory. Subjects viewed a list of 15 words on a computer screen and listened to a different list of words on headphones. They then wrote down as many words as they could recall. A third test required them to listen to and repeat a list of five words, and then recall them after a five-minute delay. This provided an accurate measurement of each participant's performance in both functions.

Participants then responded to a series of questions and statements relating to their own perceptions of their hearing and memory abilities. They were asked to agree or disagree with statements such as: "I am good at remembering names," or "I can easily have a conversation on the telephone."

To assess their views on aging, they were asked to imagine 15 scenarios and rate their concerns about each based on [age](#). In one, they were asked to imagine they were involved in a car accident in which it was unclear who was at fault, and indicate how worried they would be about being blamed for the accident because of their age. They were also asked how much they worried about being alone as they got older, losing their independence, becoming more forgetful, and finding contentment in their lives.

"Those who held negative views about getting older and believed they had challenges with their abilities to hear and remember things, also did poorly on the hearing and memory tests," said Chasteen.

"That's not to say all [older adults](#) who demonstrate poor capacities for hearing and memory have negative views of aging," said Chasteen. "It's not that negative views on aging cause poor performance in some functions, there is simply a strong correlation between the two when a negative

view impacts an individual's confidence in the ability to function."

Chasteen said the perceptions older people have about their abilities to function and how they feel about aging must be considered when determining their cognitive and sensory health. She recommends educating older people about ways in which they can influence their aging experience, including providing them with training exercises to enhance their cognitive and physical performance, and dispelling stereotypes about aging.

"Knowing that changing how older adults feel about themselves could improve their abilities to hear and remember will enable the development of interventions to improve their quality of life."

The results are described in the article titled "Do Negative Views of Aging Influence Memory and Auditory Performance Through Self-Perceived Abilities?" published in the December issue of *Psychology and Aging*. The study was coauthored by researchers at the University of Toronto, Baycrest Health Sciences, the James H. Quillen VA Medical Center, and Phonak AG. The research was supported by a Catalyst Grant from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

More information: Alison L. Chasteen et al. Do Negative Views of Aging Influence Memory and Auditory Performance Through Self-Perceived Abilities?, *Psychology and Aging* (2015). DOI: [10.1037/a0039723](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039723)

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