

Q&A: Despite COVID-19 risks, older people experience higher emotional well-being than younger adults

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Despite being most at risk of contracting COVID-19 and suffering health complications due to the virus, older adults reported feeling calm more often than younger people, and were less likely to report negative emotions like anxiety compared to people their junior, according to a recent study by Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen.

In a survey of nearly 1,000 U.S. adults conducted at the onset of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, Carstensen found that the older people were, the greater their sense of emotional well-being was.

Here, Carstensen explains some of the findings to emerge from this study, which was published Oct. 26 in *Psychological Science*, as well as previous research she has led about the emotional experiences of aging. Carstensen shares how older people are more resilient than people give them credit for and how [younger people](#) may learn a thing or two about handling stressful and difficult

situations from people their senior—like focusing more attention on the things that bring joy and pleasure in one's life.

Carstensen is a professor of psychology and the Fairleigh S. Dickinson Jr. Professor in Public Policy in Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences. She is also the founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity and the principal investigator for the Stanford Life-span Development Laboratory. She is author of "A Long Bright Future: Happiness, Health and Financial Security in an Age of Increased Longevity."

You recently studied how people are emotionally experiencing COVID-19. Can you share some of the main findings to emerge from this research?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented, sustained and unavoidable stress for the entire population, with older people facing particularly heightened risk. A threat of this scope and severity has the potential to reduce the collective well-being of the nation.

When the pandemic began, my lab became interested in potential age differences in people's [emotional experiences](#). With my [graduate student](#), Yochai Shavit, and project manager, Jessica Barnes, I conducted a survey of close to 1,000 nationally representative Americans aged 18-76. The survey was sent out in April 2020 when the pandemic was first surging in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Americans had contracted the virus, and COVID-related deaths were increasing exponentially from roughly 5,000 at the beginning of the month to 60,000 by the end. We asked participants to tell us about the positive and negative emotions they were experiencing. We asked about 29 specific emotions, some positive

and some negative.

The findings show that older people report better emotional experience than younger people—even during a pandemic that is placing them at greater risk than any other age group. That is, they were more likely to report experiencing the positive emotions we asked about—such as feelings of calm, interest and appreciation, and less likely to report experiencing negative emotions, like anxiety. The most striking difference was that older people reported experiencing negative emotions substantially less often than younger people. These findings hold when we considered their perceived risk and other variables such as personality and employment status.

What makes older people more resilient to stress than younger populations?

Two factors likely account for these age advantages. The first is experience: Older people have had more years to encounter stressful and negative experiences, and they've had more time to learn how to cope with these experiences, as well as what works for them and what doesn't in times of stress. Another important factor is that older people experience changes in their motivations and goals. There is considerable evidence that older people are more motivated to focus on the good in their daily lives and accept rather than dwell on what's bad. Instead of focusing on and worrying about the future, [older adults](#) tend to prioritize goals about the here-and-now.

What do you think younger people can learn about stress and well-being from older populations?

Time becomes more and more precious as we age—the older we get, the less time we have left—and it may be beneficial to focus our time, energy and motivation on what's meaningful and less time dwelling on the negative aspects of life. It's important to note that this type of shift isn't a denial or avoidance of the negative aspects—it's more about not becoming overwhelmed by the negative and focusing more attention and energy on what brings joy and pleasure.

As the pandemic continues, how can older people best be supported in these difficult times—especially with the holidays approaching?

In our research, we continue to find that older people care more than any other age group about emotionally meaningful aspects of life. In the midst of this pandemic, we expect that, for older people, being unable to hug their grandchildren, spend time with treasured friends and engage in meaningful activities is more detrimental to well-being than anxiety and fear of contracting COVID.

The solution for older adults is to get back to engaging with life, in whatever ways possible. This might mean connecting with friends and family, even virtually, and spending time on activities that bring meaning such as tutoring a child who may have little parental support to learn to read. Engagement in virtual volunteer opportunities can bring fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Interested parties can look at volunteer programs offered by the nonprofit organization [encore.org](#).

How do these findings compare with other research you have done on how older populations manage well-being and deal with stressful situations in their lives?

Views about aging and well-being have changed quite a bit over the years. Thirty years ago it was literally textbook knowledge that old age was characterized by anxiety, loneliness and depression. Not only has this contention proved false, we now know that older people have lower rates of mental illness than any other age group and there is substantial evidence that they experience higher levels of emotional well-being in everyday life. When these findings began to appear, researchers were very surprised. After all, old age is not a cakewalk. There is a lot of loss, from health problems, ageism and deaths of friends and loved ones. Explanations for observation that older people were actually doing better than younger people varied widely. Were older people in denial? Did they experience neurological changes that somehow softened the intensity of negative emotions? Or were what psychologists call "cohort effects" at play, with older generations simply more

resilient than younger ones?

In the mid-'90s, to address the possibility of cohort effects, my research group undertook a longitudinal study. While most studies of age and emotion had been cross-sectional—that is, comparing people of different ages at a single point in time—we followed the same people initially aged 18-92 across a period of 15 years. At five-year intervals, we surveyed them at random times during one week about the positive and negative emotions they were feeling. We were surprised that the same age patterns we'd seen in cross-sectional studies emerged within individuals over time. Participants came to report less negative experience as they aged.

One question that's remained is whether older people experience better well-being because they avoid negative situations and stress. In this view, older people don't necessarily manage [negative emotions](#) better; rather, they avoid them altogether. From this perspective, if older people are faced with stressful situations they cannot avoid, they may be less able to cope than younger people and fare worse emotionally. Exposing people to inescapable, prolonged stress in the laboratory is obviously something researchers would not do for ethical reasons. However, COVID-19 imposed the very conditions that would theoretically eliminate age advantages in emotion. This is where our current study came in, and our findings have extended previous research about age and emotion by demonstrating that older adults' relatively better emotional well-being persists even in the face of prolonged stress.

What are some common misperceptions that people have about older people and what has your research found?

People tend to view older people as frail and helpless, but there is enormous variability among older people, more so than younger people. Some older people are quite infirm. As a group, however, older people are extraordinarily resilient and actually doing better than younger people in terms of emotional well-being. When we think about how to help or interact with older people, it's important to remember their considerable strengths.

More information: Laura L. Carstensen et al. Age Advantages in Emotional Experience Persist Even Under Threat From the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Psychological Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797620967261](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620967261)

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