

Senior Moment? Ageist Stereotypes Can Hurt -- Or Help -- Older Adults' Memory

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Of the many negative stereotypes that exist about older adults, the most common is that they are forgetful, senile, and prone to so-called “senior moments.” In fact, while cognitive processes tend to decline with age, new research reveals that simply reminding older adults about ageist ideas actually exacerbates their memory problems. The new findings are forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The study, led by postdoctoral researcher Sarah Barber of the USC Davis School of Gerontology, is an extension of the idea of “stereotype threat” — that when people are confronted with negative stereotypes about a group with which they identify, they tend to self-handicap and perform worse than they would under typical circumstances. In doing so, they inadvertently confirm the negative stereotypes they were worried about in the first place.

The results highlight just how crucial it is for older adults, as well clinicians, to be aware of how ageist beliefs can affect older adults' real memory test performance.

“Older adults should be careful not to buy into negative stereotypes about aging — attributing every forgetful moment to getting older can actually worsen memory problems,” said Barber, lead author of the study.

However, as the new study shows, there may be ways to eliminate the problem.

“No one had yet examined the intriguing possibility that the mechanisms of stereotype threat vary according to age,” Barber explained.

Barber and her co-author Mara Mather, professor of gerontology and psychology at USC, conducted two experiments in which adults from the ages of 59 to 79 completed a memory test. Some participants were first asked to read fake news articles about memory loss in older adults, and others were not. Notably, the researchers structured the test so that half of the participants earned a monetary reward for each word they remembered; the other half lost money for each word they forgot.

In contrast with past tests showing that 70% of older adults met diagnostic criteria for dementia when examined under stereotype threat, the latest research shows that stereotype threat can actually *improve* older adults' performance on memory tests, but only under certain conditions.

For participants who had something to gain, being confronted with age stereotypes meant poorer performance on memory tests. They scored about 20% worse than people who were not exposed to the stereotype.

But when the participants stood to lose money for forgetting, the results flipped: Participants reminded of the stereotypes about aging and memory loss actually scored *better* than those who were under no stereotype threat.

“Stereotype threat is generally thought to be a bad thing, and it is well established that it can impair older adults’ memory performance,” Barber said. “However, our experiments demonstrate that stereotype threat can actually enhance older adults’ memory if the task involves avoiding losses.”

Older adults, it seems, respond to stereotype threat by changing their motivational priorities and focusing more on avoiding mistakes.

“Our experiments suggest an easy intervention to eliminate the negative effects of stereotype threat on older adults — clinicians should simply change the test instructions to emphasize the importance of not making mistakes,” Barber said.

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