

Your suffering is also mine: older and younger couples' responses to their partner's memory.



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Introduction

- Aging theories posit that older adults maximize their well-being by regulating their emotions and investing in their closest relationships. (1)
- No known study has examined a couple's responses to the spouse's emotional suffering due to age.
- Aging theories offer competing predictions:
 - Older listeners may disengage from their partner's disclosure to avoid experiencing negative emotions. (1)
 - Alternatively, older adults may be more engaged and thus more reactive, given the increased investment in their close relationships. (2)
- These opposing theories show a context wherein social and emotional motivations are at odds amongst older individuals.
- We hypothesize that teasing apart older adults' motivations to regulate their emotions will show a difference in emotional outcomes and empathetic responses.

Methodology

Procedure: Participants listened to their partner disclose an upsetting personal memory. Afterward, Listener's and Disclosure rated the listener's perspective-taking, listeners rated through their own and their partner's emotions, then rated their own and their partner's cognitive empathy.

Measures: This study included measures of self and partner ratings of sadness, listening behavior, cognitive empathy, both partner's perception of the listener's empathy, and observational codes of listener's engagement.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participants N = 107 Couples	M (SD) or N (%)
Average Age	56.52 (11.22)
Couples Satisfactory Index	128.35 (24.50)
Average Years Lived Together	28.13 (14.02)
Comorbidities	0.30 (0.61)
Race (% non-white)	16 (7.48%)
Education (% that attended at least some college)	210 (98.13%)

Results

- There were no age differences in the listener's reactivity, perspective-taking, or observed engagement.
- Older listeners rated their disclosing partner as less sad than their younger counterparts ($p < .05$).
- This effect was attenuated ($p = .077$) by observed emotional intensity.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis between Age and Task Outcomes

	Engaged Listening Behavior B (SE), <i>p</i>	Listener's Perception of the Discloser's Sadness B (SE), <i>p</i>	Listener's Post-Disclosure Sadness** B (SE), <i>p</i>	Discloser's Perception of Listener's Cognitive Empathy Given B (SE), <i>p</i>	Listener's Perception of their own Cognitive Empathy (self-rating) B (SE), <i>p</i>
Intercept	2.474 (0.314) $p < 0.0001^*$	80.504 (11.924) $p < 0.0001^*$	44.652 (11.069) $p < 0.0001^*$	8.331 (0.282) $p < 0.0001^*$	23.245 (1.300) $p < 0.0001^*$
Order of Disclosure (Husband First)	0.123 (0.118) $p = 0.2961$	3.6834 (4.479) $p = 0.412$	0.435 (0.435) $p = 0.9159$	0.0817 (0.105) $p = 0.4388$	0.572 (0.489) $p = 0.2452$
Gender (Female)	0.262 (0.104) $p = 0.0129$	-8.905 (3.546) $p = 0.014$	1.508 (3.156) $p = 0.6338$	0.142 (0.095) $p = 0.1237$	0.086 (0.376) $p = 0.8197$
Age	-0.004 (0.005) $p = 0.4209$	-0.469 (0.198) $p = 0.0195$	-0.243 (0.181) $p = 0.1824$	0.002 (.005) $p = 0.7296$	0.013 (0.022) $p = 0.5421$

* = $p < .05$; **This model controlled for baseline sadness ratings.

Discussion

- Our findings do not support either prediction made by previous results. Older adults did not disengage more and were not more reactive than younger adults. Our results show that further research is needed.
- One possible explanation of these findings is that negativity amongst the population and emotional regulation may have changed since previous research.

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Citations

1. Cartensen, L.L (June 30th, 2006) *The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development*. Bethesda, Maryland, USA: National Institute of Health.
 2.Reidger, M., Blanke E.S. (September 18th, 2020) *Knowing What Others Think and Feel: Empathic Accuracy Across Adulthood*. Palto Alto, California, USA: The Annual Review of Developmental Psychology.