Older Age is Associated with More Positive Reframing of Memories from the Spring Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

- Older age has been associated with greater focus on silver linings and reduced memory negativity (Ford, DiBiase & Kensinger 2018; Ford, DiBiase, Ryu & Kensinger, 2018). But in these past studies, adults were reflecting on past events that had resolved.
- The COVID-19 Pandemic provided a novel opportunity to examine whether these age differences would exist when older adults reflected on an earlier phase of an unresolved, ongoing event and in the context of a sustained event that puts them at disproportionate health-risk.
- Hypotheses: older age will relate to (i) greater tendency to remember the silver linings from the spring phase, and (ii) reduced focus on negative aspects of memories from that period and reduced vividness for negative memories.
- With our design, we also could explore whether age differences in memory for the spring phase of the pandemic existed above-and-beyond age differences in the affective experience as reported in real-time during that spring phase.

Methods

Spring Phase Surveys
- Early Spring (03/20 - 04/04/20)
- Late Spring (04/16 - 05/01/20)

Memory Surveys
- Early Summer (06/15/20)
- N = 512, ages 18-90 (mean age = 39.8, 428 F)

Affective Reflections on Spring Phase of the Pandemic
- Overall Affective Tone
- Silver Linings During the Spring
- Sense of re...-

Vividness of Specific Memories from the Pandemic
- Positive Memory Vividness
- Negative Memory Vividness

Increased age was associated with:
- Increased PANAS positive scores (p<.001)
- Decreased PANAS negative, PHQ-9 (depression), subjective stress, and worry composite (all p<.001)

Conclusions

- As predicted, when tested during the summer, older adults remembered more of the positive aspects (i.e. silver linings) from the spring phase of the pandemic, compared to younger adults:
  - Increased focus on positive reflections (e.g. remembering the community coming together, and feeling hope that the efforts would save lives)
  - Older age was also associated with an increased endorsement of positive memory vividness and re-experiencing, but not of a challenging memory.
- These memory effects existed above-and-beyond effects of age on wellbeing as the spring phase of the pandemic unfolded.
- Older adults’ positive memory framing persists during an ongoing negative event, and even when they are at most health-risk.
- These results suggest that older age may benefit adults in two ways: Enabling them to show greater resiliency in the moment as a challenging experience unfolds, and also allowing them to reflect on the more positive aspects and silver linings.

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