



## AGING AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE: DYNAMICS OF POSITIVITY, NEGATIVITY, AND COMPLEXITY

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**Abstract.** *This article analyzes age-related characteristics of emotional experience across adulthood. The findings indicate that older adults experience positive emotions as frequently as younger individuals, whereas negative emotions occur significantly less often. In addition, emotional experience becomes more complex with age, and positive and negative states appear in more interconnected forms. The stability of emotional states also changes across age, with positive states tending to last longer and negative states dissipating more quickly. These results are interpreted within the framework of socioemotional selectivity theory and demonstrate that emotional functioning in later adulthood is both stable and increasingly complex.*

**Keywords:** *emotional experience, adult age, negative emotions, positive emotions, socioemotional selectivity theory, emotional complexity, emotional stability.*

**Introduction.** Emotions are a central component of human functioning; they guide thought and behavior from the earliest days of life [16]. Recent research has revealed substantial evidence regarding early developmental gains in emotional differentiation [6] and emotion regulation [21]. This literature also highlights the social nature of emotion. Initially, emotion regulation appears to be external to the individual, with caregivers playing a primary role in soothing, stimulating,

comforting, and otherwise influencing infants' emotional states. Over time, however, regulatory processes become internalized; cognitive appraisals of the emotional significance of environmental stimuli begin to shape emotional responses [18]. Although comparatively little is known about the developmental course of emotional experience and regulation in adulthood, it is evident that successful emotion regulation is central to functioning in interpersonal relationships, coping with life challenges, and optimizing mental health.

**Main Body.** Emotional functioning in later stages of life is often assumed to follow a developmental trajectory similar to biological and cognitive functioning across adulthood and old age, namely stabilization in late adolescence and early adulthood, relative constancy in midlife, and eventual decline characterized by dysregulation and rigidity in later years [4]. However, empirical evidence for emotional deterioration in adulthood is difficult to find. On the contrary, a small but growing body of literature on emotional development in adulthood presents a more positive picture, suggesting that improvements in emotional functioning may continue into middle age and possibly even into older adulthood [10]. For example, older adults, compared to younger adults, demonstrate higher levels of complexity in mental representations enriched with affect and subjectivity [9]; report better emotion regulation abilities [7]; show well-preserved expressive systems [10]; and tend to be relatively happier [2] and more satisfied with life [8]. In another study, Mroczek and Kolarz [10] found that increasing age is associated with higher self-reported positive affect and lower negative affect. Research also suggests that the salience of emotion may increase with age, resulting in better memory for emotional material [6], a more central role of emotion in cognitive representations of other people [7], and a stronger influence of emotion in interpersonal problem-solving [2].

**Discussion and Results.** The two lifespan developmental theories that have motivated much of the empirical research described above both propose that emotional development continues throughout adulthood. Both theories are grounded

in the idea that age and experience are deeply intertwined and that knowledge about emotions plays a central role in emotion regulation; therefore, aging may be associated with emotional maturation. Gisela Labouvie-Vief and colleagues have argued that cognitive functioning becomes increasingly infused with affect in later adulthood, with peak intellectual performance occurring in middle age. According to this perspective, children must suppress idiosyncratic affective evaluations in order to acquire culturally shared symbolic systems and develop uniform representations of the world [10]. In contrast, adult cognitive development involves the reintegration of subjective information into existing knowledge structures. Theoretically, this increasing complexity in cognitive operations is associated with more complex and adaptive emotional responses, as well as greater flexibility in coping with new life experiences [12].

The second theory related to emotional functioning in adulthood is Socioemotional Selectivity Theory [10]. Although this theory also recognizes experience as an important factor in emotional development, it places greater emphasis on the subjective perception of time left in life rather than past experience. According to the theory, the human ability to consciously and unconsciously monitor time plays a fundamental role in motivation and emotion, providing a framework within which goals are set, pursued, and evaluated. Since mortality represents the ultimate constraint on time, chronological age is associated with changes in goals. Essentially, the theory proposes that two main trajectories of social motivation operate across the life span: an emotion-oriented trajectory and a knowledge-oriented trajectory. The former is characterized by the pursuit of emotional satisfaction and meaning, while the latter is characterized by motivation to acquire new information and achieve success in domains that ensure future adaptation (such as education and occupational development).

A major developmental shift in adulthood is the change in the importance of social goals. Younger adults, having a longer perceived future and many things yet

to learn, are primarily motivated by knowledge-seeking—even when this requires temporarily limiting emotional well-being. In contrast, older adults show the opposite pattern. Facing a shorter perceived future and having already accumulated substantial knowledge about others, older individuals prioritize emotional goals because these are experienced in the present moment rather than stored for an uncertain future.

The theory emphasizes that aging does not simply imply a constant pursuit of happiness, but rather satisfaction derived from emotionally meaningful goals, which involves much more than merely feeling good. Finding meaning in existing relationships, even conflicted ones, becomes a central task in later life. As a result, emotional experience is expected to become more complex, and the experience of mixed emotions becomes more frequent. In short, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory suggests that limitations on time directly shape emotional experience, leading to increasingly blended emotional states. The awareness that an experience will soon end transforms emotional experience itself. It does not merely trigger negative emotions related to anticipated loss; instead, moments are savored and appreciated both for what they are and for their temporal transience.

Based on the studies reviewed in [10], age-related reductions in positive affect are typically observed when positive emotions are operationalized in terms of excitement and high arousal.

Negative emotional experience is less frequent among older adults, and this hypothesis has been strongly supported [10]. Our findings, together with previously reported evidence in the literature, clearly indicate that early adulthood is the life stage in which negative affect is most prevalent.

Findings on the temporal stability of emotions are consistent with reports that emotion regulation improves with age. Interestingly, these findings are linear in nature, indicating that emotion regulation continues to improve up to the oldest age groups we studied [10]. Thus, by bypassing potential subjective bias in global self-

reports, experience-sampling data support findings from self-reported measures suggesting that emotion regulation improves with age. Older adults in everyday life were not simply more emotionally stable overall. Rather, highly positive emotions tended to be stable, whereas highly negative emotions tended to be unstable.

Overall, the results of this study are consistent with the most classic developmental hypothesis [10]: development proceeds with increasing differentiation. We found higher emotional differentiation in older adults compared to younger individuals, and we also observed that emotional differentiation is associated with positive characteristics such as lower neuroticism and better emotional control. These findings are particularly important given the widely held view that cognitive and biological aging are associated with numerous declines and that adult development is characterized by “dedifferentiation” [18]. Our findings, however, suggest the opposite: emotional functioning may continue to improve even while cognitive speed and biological resilience decline.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory suggests that time limitations associated with human mortality generate complex emotional responses in later life, and this condition is characterized more by “poignancy” — that is, mixed and emotionally rich experiences — than by happiness alone. People begin to recognize not only what they have, but also the impermanence of what they have. For example, a farewell kiss between spouses at the age of 85 may evoke far more complex and multilayered emotional responses than a similar experience at age 20. According to the theory, when the fragility of life is fully realized, emotions become deeper and more complex. Some positive emotions may decline; however, emotional well-being does not disappear, and negative affect does not become dominant. If, as Socioemotional Selectivity Theory suggests, these effects are more closely related to perceived proximity to the end of life than to chronological age, then the theory may also help explain why individuals suffering from terminal illness

often report their lives as better than ever before (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor et al., 1992).

Across later adulthood, all emotions are experienced across the full spectrum; however, negative emotions occur less frequently and are better regulated, while emotional experience becomes more complex. Compared to younger adults, older individuals are more likely to experience complex, mixed emotional states, and positive and negative experiences are less independent (i.e., more interconnected).

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