Age Differences in Mental Health Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

- Prior research shows that older adults handle stress and cope better than younger adults.
- This may be due to:
  - Older adults having greater emotional intelligence than younger adults¹.
  - Life course perspective of older adults, allowing them to better regulate their emotions²,³.
- We wanted to see if older adults were coping as effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic, a stressful and novel event.

RESEARCH AIM

Do older adults report less mental health symptoms than younger adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

METHOD

- Survey was distributed to participants from April-May 2020 (N=525, age range=25-84)
- Asked to endorse all applicable mental health symptoms
- Planned linear regression models were run using predictors of interest (age, loneliness, physical health)
- Shared items between clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depression Cluster</th>
<th>Anxiety Cluster</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low self-worth</td>
<td>Irritability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in appetite</td>
<td>Obsessive checking on family/friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate less often</td>
<td>Obsessive cleaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>Cannot stop consuming COVID media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Interest</td>
<td>Cannot stop physical symptoms</td>
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Factor 1: Depression-related
- 7 items
- Cronbach’s alpha = .62
- E.g.: Loneliness, Low self-worth, Lack of motivation

Factor 2: Anxiety-related (general)
- 2 items
- Cronbach’s alpha = .48
- E.g.: Anxiety, Stress

Factor 3: Anxiety-related (COVID)
- 2 items
- Cronbach’s alpha = .41
- E.g.: Checking on family/friends, COVID media consumption

RESULTS

- Loneliness (β = 1.28, p < .001) and general physical health (β = -0.25, p = .013) predicted an increase in number of overall mental health symptoms endorsed.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Outcome variable</th>
<th>Model predictors</th>
<th>Model results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of mental health symptom items (exclude loneliness)</td>
<td>B0 + B1(Age) + B2(Loneliness) + B3(Age * Loneliness)</td>
<td>F(3, 521) = 9.78, p &lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B0 + B1(Age) + B2(Psychological health) + B3(Age * Physical health)</td>
<td>F(3, 521) = 3.62, p = .013</td>
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CONCLUSION

- As age increased, the number of anxiety symptoms reported generally decreased.
- Greater mental health symptoms reported if participants experienced loneliness or low general physical health.
- Data was collected early in the pandemic, and people’s wellbeing and expectations may have shifted over the time course of the pandemic.

REFERENCES