

Young Peoples Views of Aging Can Predict their Heart Problems in Old Age

Younger people with strong negative stereotypes about the elderly are more likely to experience strokes, heart attacks and other heart problems when they grow old, a researcher at the Yale School of Public Health has found.

It is the first study that shows a link between a younger person's stereotypes and the influence they can have on their health decades later.

At the start of the study, 440 participants, aged 18 to 49, had their age stereotypes toward the elderly measured. Thirty years later, 25 percent of those with more negative age stereotypes had suffered a heart problem or stroke, while only 13 percent of those with more positive age stereotypes experienced a heart problem or stroke.

A younger group of 225 individuals, aged 18 to 39, who had their first heart problem or stroke after their 60th birthday was also studied. Participants with more negative age stereotypes were also significantly more likely to have heart problems or strokes than those with more positive age stereotypes.

“We found that the age stereotypes, which tend to be acquired in childhood and young adulthood, and carried over into old age, seem to have far-reaching effects,” said Becca R. Levy, associate professor of epidemiology and psychology and the study's lead author. The study appears in the March issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

The effects of the negative age stereotypes were seen above and beyond a number of factors—including blood pressure, family health history, depression and education. Among the negative age stereotypes reported were that elderly people were ‘feeble’ or ‘helpless.’ The data were drawn from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. “The findings suggest that efforts to reduce the negative age stereotypes of younger individuals could provide them with better health when they reach the age of those they had been previously targeting with these stereotypes” Levy said.

The mechanism by which stereotypes can influence heart problems years later is suggested by earlier studies conducted by Levy and colleagues. They found that negative age stereotypes can increase stress responses and decrease the tendency to carry out healthy behaviors, which are associated with worse cardiovascular health.

Other study authors are: Martin D. Slade, of the Yale School of Medicine, and Luigi Ferrucci and Alan B. Zonderman, both of the National Institute on Aging Intramural Research Program in Baltimore. The research was supported by the National Institute on Aging Intramural Research Program, and grants from the Patrick and Catherine Weldon Donaghue Medical Research Foundation and a National Institute of Heart, Lung and Blood.

~ Story by Michael Greenwood