

Older adults are not as good at detecting sarcasm as their younger counterparts

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Older adults are not as good at detecting sarcasm as their younger counterparts according to research from the University of Aberdeen.

Led by Professor Louise Phillips, Chair in Psychology, the team reported that adults over 65 were more likely to misinterpret sarcastic comments and take the literal meaning, rather than the intended jibe.

Professor Phillips said: "Losing the ability to respond appropriately to [sarcasm](#) might affect our relationships and friendships as we age.

"We already know that engaging in social interactions is valuable, particularly as we age, and we were interested in finding out how the normal ageing process might affect our ability to understand subtle social cues such as sarcasm."

In the study, published in *Developmental Psychology*, older adults were shown examples of conversations between people and asked them to

judge whether the exchange was sarcastic or not. Professor Phillips and the team, including collaborators from the University of Geneva and University College London, found that younger and middle-aged adults were significantly better at identifying sarcasm than older adults.

Professor Phillips said: "Until now, no one has looked at how [older adults](#) interpret sarcasm, and specifically, if they can flip the literal meaning to understand the intended meaning. So, we are interested in finding out how whether our ability to understand other people's intentions changes as we age.

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"For example, if someone says 'I see you're on time as usual', this could literally mean what it says. Or, there might be a sarcastic intention, and then the underlying message is 'You're late. As usual.' Deciding which way to interpret the statement depends on the context, and also the speaker's tone of voice and facial expression. How this is interpreted can obviously affect the outcome of the conversation and ultimately determine how relationships develop.

"We found that older people were worse at detecting sarcasm and more likely to take the [literal meaning](#) than both younger and middle aged adults. This difference could not be explained by misunderstanding the conversation or memory difficulties.

"However, in some situations it might be a good thing to misinterpret sarcasm, given that it can sometimes be considered nasty or derogatory. Older adults are known to have a more positive outlook on life than younger adults and this may contribute to their failure to pick up on sarcastic undertones."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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