

Abstract

According to WHO (2021), one in two people have ageist beliefs, which can lead to a presumption of age that might result in bad health and well-being in older individuals. In light of current pandemic, there are needs to clarify whether age is a protective or a risk factor on stress and well-being, hoping that it will provide us with evidence on addressing ageism and ensure better allocation of support in this stressful time. When facing stress, “positivity effect”, which suggests that with age, people are more biased toward positive stimulus and away from negative stimulus, the age-related change of appraisal posits age to be a protective factor, while age-related decline in physiological adaptive functioning suggests otherwise. This study aims at clarifying whether age poses a stress buffering effect and investigating the potential moderating effect of affective well-being (AWB) on the relationship between age and stress responses. In this study, 88 university students (aged 18-28 years) and 96 older adults (aged 60-84 years) were recruited, and social stress was experimentally induced to them via Tier Social Stress Test (TSST). Before and after the stress, physiological stress responses (blood pressure and heart rate variability) were measured. AWB was assessed using the differences between the scores of positive and negative affect items in Affective Valuation Inventory (AVI) before TSST. Contrary to stereotype, we found that older participants had both higher AWB and lower stress responses, than younger participants. Furthermore, we did find a significant moderation of AWB ($F(1,142) = 3.816, p < .05$) on the age difference of physiological stress responses. The higher the AWB, the wider the differences on systolic blood pressure reactivity between younger adults and older adults. But surprisingly, a more obvious age difference on systolic blood pressure reactivity was found in low AWB ($F(1,142) = 6.253, p < .01$). Our findings suggest that, in facing stress, older age is a protective factor toward stress.

Key words: age, stress reactivity, affective well-being, ageism