



A Pilot Study of Age Differences in Fear-Seeking vs. Fear-Avoiding Behaviors in a Naturally-Occurring Fear Event

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INTRODUCTION

Older Adults Prefer Positive Information

- Older adults (OA) prefer positive information over negative information in a lab setting (i.e., *positivity effects*; Mikels & Carstensen, 2005)
- The extent to which OA avoid negative events relevant for their health and safety is less clear
- The SAVI model suggests OA are particularly vigilant in avoiding high arousal negative circumstances because they are less able to recover from such events (Charles, 2010)

Attending to Negative Information is Important for Survival

- One lab study found OA *do* take in negative health-relevant information (Isaacowitz & Choi, 2012)
- Additionally, OA watch the news more than young adults (YA), even though it is mostly negative (Mares & Woodard, 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008)

Fear is Difficult to Study in the Lab

- It is difficult to induce fear using emotion-provoking stimuli (e.g., film clips) in a lab setting (Stanley & Isaacowitz, 2015)
- We took advantage of a naturally-occurring fearful event to study age differences in fear-seeking and fear-avoiding behaviors, during the outbreak of Ebola in 2014

GOAL: Test whether OA attend to fearful health information tied to an actual current threat

Hypotheses

- We expected OA to seek out fear more than YA
- We expected that OA would fear Ebola more than YA

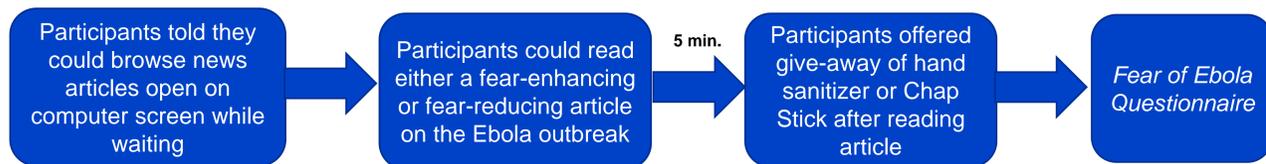
METHOD

Participants

15 YA $M_{age} = 21.20, SD = 5.28$ 33% female
 13 OA $M_{age} = 68.69, SD = 4.77$ 53% female

Participants came to the lab to participate in a different study and were asked to wait 5 minutes in a waiting room

Procedure



Materials

Cleveland News



Reasons to Calm Down About Ebola



Why Ebola is so Dangerous

Fear of Ebola Questionnaire $\alpha = .79$

1 (Not at All) to 5 (Extremely Often) Likert-type scale

How often in the past week:

- Did you fear that you could contract Ebola?
- Did you fear one of your loved ones could contract Ebola?
- Did you think about Ebola?

How afraid are you of contracting Ebola?

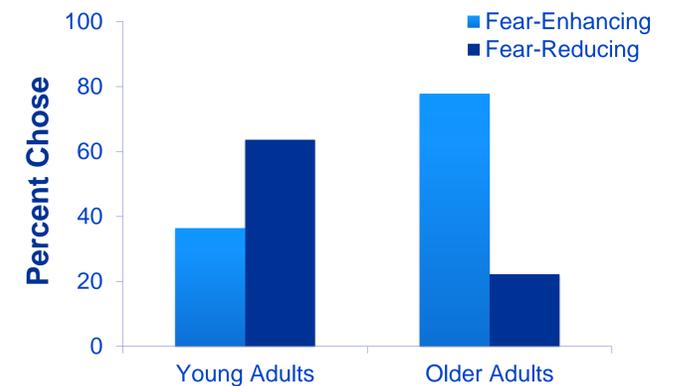
(Not at All) to (Extremely)

2014 EBOLA OUTBREAK TIMELINE



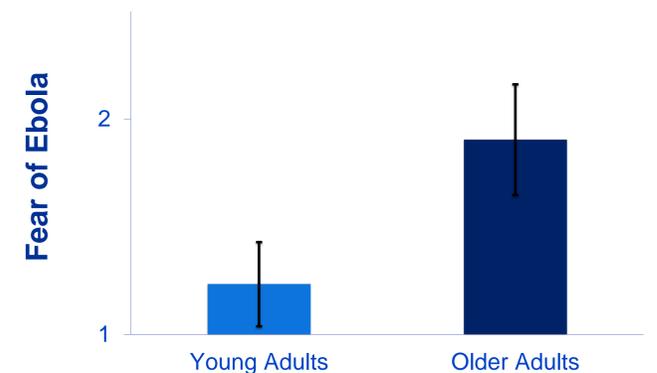
RESULTS

Age Differences in the Selection of Fear-Enhancing vs. Fear Reducing Articles



Consistent with our prediction, OA were more likely to choose the fear-enhancing article while YA were more likely to choose the fear-reducing article, $\chi^2(2) = 3.43$, one-tailed $p = .03$

Age Differences in Fear of Ebola



OA were more likely than YA to choose hand sanitizer over Chap Stick, $\chi^2(3) = 7.27$, one-tailed $p = .03$.



OA reported greater fear of Ebola than YA, $t(26) = 2.47$, $p = .02$.

DISCUSSION

- It appears that older adults *will* interact with negative information that is relevant to their health and safety.
- These results suggest that investigating fear-related behaviors in young and older adults in naturally-occurring fearful situations may be a fruitful avenue for future research.