



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

The Myths of Aging

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AGEISM

Western culture values achievement, productivity and speed. As a result, a number of negative myths have developed about getting older. We tend to view older people as sick, demented, frail, weak, disabled, dependant powerless, sexless, passive, alone, unhappy and incapable.



Figure 1: Negative views of older people as dependant, disabled and unhappy

While old age is not always an easy, these beliefs do not consider all the scientific facts and the rapid changes that are affecting our functioning and quality of life in old age.

Self-fulfilling Prophecies: Unfortunately, these myths can lead to ageism and a fear of ageing. Furthermore, this can set up self fulfilling prophecies. People can avoid tackling the challenges of old age which can lead to negative and unsatisfying lives. They feel old younger and sadly die sooner at a result.

THIS DOES NOT NEED TO HAPPEN

A MORE BALANCED VIEW OF LATER LIFE

In Asian and African cultures, later life is often highly valued. The wisdom and expertise that only comes with old age is celebrated, respected and even longed for.



Getting older does not have to be something that is feared. It is just another stage in the life cycle, with its own particular challenges, just like adolescence or middle age. All you have to do is know the facts, and how to adapt to the challenges old age brings. The advantage of being older is that you have more skills and experience than you have had at any other time in your life.

The following looks at common views of late life and highlights how they are myths rather than fact:

Myth 1: All old people are the same:

You are old by the time you are 65

Myth 2: To be old is to be sick

Ageing is a disease – it is out with your control

Myth 3: To be old is to be depressed

Myth 4: To be old is to be confused:

Old people do not change or learn new things

Myth 5: To be old is to be a burden

MYTH 1: All old people are the same: You are old by the time you reach 65

Most recently, in the West, we have based old age on chronological age of retirement, set currently at 65. This may have been appropriate for our grandparent's day, where people less able to carry on with physically demanding jobs and not live many years past this age.

Improvements in functioning:

However, in the 21st Century we are living longer and more healthily for often many decades past retirement. Our level of functioning can vary hugely between 65 and +100 and so it is not useful to make generalisations about such a wide age range.

Diversity in functioning:

Additionally, knowing the number of years we have lived, does not help us to predict functioning. Some people will enjoy the biological fitness of a 40 year old at 65. While other peers will look and act more like an 80 year old.

What varies more than even biological age, is psychological age – how old we feel. This does not depend on years lived or even how healthy we are. Thus we can be 80 and have severe arthritis, but still feel as young as we did when we were in our 20's.

Attitude to ageing

Our attitude to ageing – whether we embrace and adapt to growing older, or fear and try and avoid it, can affect our physical and mental health and ultimately our life expectancy. The good thing is that we have more control over our psychological age than the other types of ageing.

MYTH 2: To be old is to be sick – and there is nothing you can do about it

It is true that there are some physical and mental changes that are due to the aging process and can not be prevented. For example the kidneys, heart, lungs and immune system become weaker as we get older. As a result of this and our genes, our bodies become more susceptible to illness and there are certain medical conditions that are more common in old age.

Changes illness pattern of old age

However, due to advances in medicine, environmental and lifestyle factors, the type of conditions has changed in the past century from acute, infectious conditions to chronic illnesses such as arthritis, hypertension & heart disease, diabetes and sensory impairments.

Compared to the 1960's, the risk factors for these chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure & cholesterol and smoking have been reduced through medication and lifestyle change. Thus, older people are suffering fewer chronic conditions.

Improving functioning in old age

Furthermore these conditions are interfering less with older peoples day to day functioning and quality of life. Relatively few older people live in nursing homes – about 5% (which is similar to the under 65 population). Most are free of disability. Although this declines with age, studies have shown that even after the age of 85, 40% of the population is fully functional. Finally, there is growing evidence that older people often perceive themselves as healthy despite having multiple health problems.

Control over the rate at which we age

Although genes have some impact on our health, studies have shown we can slow down old age by maintaining a health physical and emotional lifestyle. In a study, people were assessed between the ages of 40 and 70 years old for illness risk factors, such as smoking, being overweight and a lack of exercise. Those with low risk postponed age of disability onset for more than 5 years!

Research has also shown that it is never too late to make changes, even if we have had a life-time of being unhealthy. Function can be recovered and risk of disease can be lessened.

WE CAN CONTROL THE RATE WE AGE & OUR HEALTH by:

Good diet
Sufficient exercise
Positive attitude
Learning to adapt to changes
Continuing to engage actively in life through productivity & strong relationships



MYTH 3: To be old is to be depressed

Late life can be associated with many losses, more than at any other stage of life:

Loss of job
Loss of status
Loss of finances
Loss of health
Loss of mobility
Loss of independence
Loss of social life through bereavement



It may be understandable to think that older people would be more likely to be depressed than younger people because of all these losses.

Yet they are not!!! The rate of depression, in populations living at home, is the same for younger people as it is for older people – only 15%.

DEPRESSION IS NOT NORMAL PART OF LATER LIFE!

This shows that most older people use their life experiences and skills to adapt successfully to these losses. Later life is not just about loss – it is about gain too – you don't stop developing just because you have reached 65!



KEEP THE MEANING!

It is important that we keep our lives meaningful. Sometimes through loss of job, role, health or a partner etc we can no longer find purpose in life. This is the challenge of later life, how to maintain a meaningful life despite the losses. Successful agers have done this a hundreds of ways through

- Keep working – part time, voluntary, or care-giving
- Maintaining Relationships - roles within the family eg as parent or grandparent, or community, friend, advocate, teacher or fund raiser
- Continuing with Life long hobbies, interest and skills
- Keep family or local traditions going eg at xmas or religious times
- Having a faith or life philosophy

They may have to modify how they do these things to adapt to losses in health etc but it is important to find ways round these obstacles rather than give up these important activities to keep meaning going in our lives and prevent depression.

Successful agers also have a range of interests – so don't put your eggs all in one basket such as, in physical activities, as loss in health could leave you with nothing meaningful in your life. Those who age most successfully focus less on striving to achieve and more on maintaining the positive things have already achieved, accepting the live they've lived, good bits and bad.

What is most meaningful in your life? Keep a balance between:

- Work vs play
- Outcome vs process – do some activities that don't involve winning or the end product for pleasure.
- Mental vs physical activities
- Social vs solo activities – at home and in the community

Myth 4: To be old is to be forgetful and confused

It is true that dementia increases with age, but it is not an inevitable part of getting older. Only 10% of over 65's suffer from dementia.

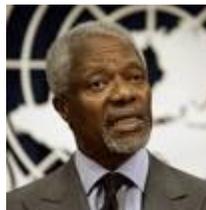
It is true that with age the brain does slow slightly and is less flexible. Younger people tend to have better vision, hearing, short-term memory and reaction time. Some kinds of learning involving say speed and muscular strength and coordination might be impossible for older people.

However, some deficits can be over come and many abilities are preserved or even enhanced with age. Thus, you can teach an old dog new trick but just in a different way to a young dog! The key conditions for learning in older people are:

- 1) Create expectations that learning will occur – if we are not challenged, anxious or embarrassed then we performed less well
- 2) Opportunity to work at their own pace
- 3) Time to practise new skills

Thus 90 year olds can learn successfully to use household appliances and technology that were non-existent in their youth.

There are many problems where speed is not useful. Instead, careful reflection drawing on a wealth and breadth of experience is needed, which older people excel at. That is why many of the world's most respected leaders, such as Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan are well past their retirement age.



We can also strengthen mental functioning in older age by:

- 1) regular physical activity
- 2) strong social support system
- 3) belief in our ability to meet life's challenges

Successful agers do not stop learning and are not afraid to try new things. Thus it is important to have life long learning whether it be a new hobby, skill, idea or fact– keep at it fresh!

Don't predict the end of your life too early – you could live for another 20 years! Learning new ways of seeing the world keeps the mind and body growing. Always have a goal for the future – no matter how small.



Figure: Leonardo Da Vinci and Picasso did some of their best work in later life

MYTH 5: Older people do not pull their weight

It is true that older people do use more health and social services than younger people.

However, to say that they are relatively unproductive is wrong and unfair. It assumes that everyone who works for pay is pulling their weight and everyone who does not is a burden. However, some wage-earners do very little or can be damaging to society eg loan sharks. Also it is misleading to think that childcare or volunteering is unproductive. Over 65's still contribute massively to society through the following activities:

Paid work (many more would work beyond retirement if their employers were more flexible or were more enthusiastic in hiring older workers)

Voluntary work

Unpaid carers of partners, grandchildren and other relatives – saves the tax payer millions

Emotional support to younger generation which can be of indirect financial benefit by preventing sick leave

Passing on knowledge, traditions, culture and identity to younger generations

Grey political power



Other, more psychological changes naturally occur as we get older too. These changes might be looked at as changing priorities throughout the life span. Challenges

While at school, **adolescents** are finding out who they are, developing a sense of identity and forming relationships. At this stage the need for intimacy develops and fights against the fear of isolation.

Younger adults tend to see themselves in relation to their achievements, which are often work related. This is also the time that many people are naturally driven to have children. At this time there is a conflict between generativity and stagnation.

Later on in life this changes yet again, and the focus of the tasks of self identity move from achievements towards acceptance of the life that has been lived.



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