



Romeo Vitelli Ph.D.
Media Spotlight

AGING

Exploding the Myths About Aging

Why are people so pessimistic about growing older?

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We don't stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing - George Bernard Shaw

For all that we are regularly besieged with slogans such as "60 is the new 40", many people continue to view growing older with a sense of dread. Despite decades of research into human aging, not to mention the fact that people are living longer and more productive lives, there still seems to be a popular belief that older adults have nothing to look forward to but worsening health problems and becoming a burden on society.

A [new opinion piece published](#) in the journal *American Psychologist* explores some of the common misconceptions about aging that help reinforce this [pessimism](#) about growing older. As Manfred Diehl of Colorado State University, Michael A. Smyer of Bucknell University, and Chandra M. Mehrotra of the College of St. Scholastica point out in their article, not only has life expectancy risen steadily in the United States over the past 100 years, but advances in medicine have ensured that those extra years remain disability-free for most people. In fact, never before in human history have adults had so many years of active life available to them, something that gerontologists refer to as the "longevity dividend"

In addition to longer and healthier lives, we are also seeing far more opportunities for spending those extra years as productively as possible. That means far more opportunities for adults to keep themselves mentally and physically fit, as well as staying involved with their communities and families alike. And yet, a new report by the [Framework Institute](#) titled "Gauging aging: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of aging in America" demonstrates a continuing public pessimism about growing older that seems hard to overcome. As the report indicates, while most people hope to stay active and healthy as they grow older, they often view this hope as unrealistic due to worries about their own health, their financial circumstances, and the general state of the world.

That's not to say that these fears are entirely unfounded, however. With [six in 10 adults in the United States having at least one chronic disease](#), and [four in 10 U.S. adults having two or more chronic conditions](#), it's hardly surprising that most of us worry about becoming incapacitated as we grow older. This includes the perennial [fear](#) of developing [dementia](#) or any of the other medical or [psychiatric](#) problems often seen in seniors. But, as Diehl, Smyer, and Mehrotra point out, even when accepting that growing older means becoming more vulnerable to physical and psychological issues, it's important to remember the following:

Aging is Not All Loss and Decline

Studies looking at aging have primarily divided seniors into two categories: young-old (60 to 75), and old-old (80 or greater). These studies have consistently shown that [young-old seniors](#), and even [old-old seniors](#), can continue to grow, both intellectually, emotionally, any, yes, physically as well. With intellectual aging, for example, [findings from](#) the Seattle Longitudinal Study of Adult Cognitive Development showed that the [greatest decline in overall cognitive abilities](#) doesn't begin until people are in their 80s. For people in their [60s and 70s](#), [cognitive decline](#) tends to be minimal except for [numerical ability and processing speed](#), something that is rarely an issue for most seniors.

decrease only occurring in old-old age.

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Survey studies looking at adults at different stages in life reliably demonstrate that emotional well-being and life satisfaction generally improve with time, even when physical health, demographic factors, and personality are taken into account. The prevalence rate of psychiatric disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders are also significantly lower in adults aged 60 and over than for younger adults.

You Have More Control Over How You Age Than You Might Think

Despite the common belief that age-related changes are completely beyond our control, this is far from the case.

Though genetics plays an important role in how long you are likely to live, lifestyle choices you make can be crucial as well. A 2014 study of identical twins showed that genetics only accounts for about 30 percent of age-related memory changes. The rest of the variance appears to be due to environmental and lifestyle differences.

Certainly the risk of developing serious diseases often varies depending on whether or not people engage in healthy and unhealthy behaviors.

For example, the risk of Alzheimer's disease appears to be directly related to lifestyle factors, including obesity, smoking, depression, cognitive inactivity, low education, and physical inactivity. Other diseases, including hyperactivity, diabetes, heart disease, and different types of cancer can also be lifestyle-related. People who choose to be physically active, who eat a sensible diet (e.g., Mediterranean diet), who maintain a normal body weight, who abstain from smoking, who remain socially active, and who engage in cognitively stimulating activities can slow down cognitive decline and delay the onset of dementia significantly.

Though there is still some controversy over how much activity is needed to remain healthy, research studies suggest that thirty minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week may be all that most people need. Along with improved cardiovascular health, regular exercise can also reduce the likelihood of Type 2 diabetes, cancer, and depression, among other medical conditions. Regular cognitive training can also help seniors improve memory and attention functioning, as well as other cognitive skills such as processing speed and inductive reasoning. Long-term follow-up studies also suggest that cognitive training can also help seniors remain independent as long as possible. Even engaging in regular cognitively demanding hobbies, i.e., learning new skills such as photography or quilting, can promote better memory and fluid intelligence.

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it might be possible to *reverse* it as well. To some extent, at least. [One research study](#) using data from the Seattle Longitudinal Study suggests that cognitive training can help *reverse age-related declines* in spatial orientation and inductive reasoning, particularly in women.

Research into age-related loss of muscle mass and bone density also found that *resistance exercise* can not only help *slow down this decline but can also reverse it as well*. Though it's still not clear why this occurs, these findings have been replicated in numerous studies and can be especially important for postmenopausal women who are vulnerable to conditions such as osteoporosis.

While the risk of becoming disabled in old age has actually been declining in recent years, seniors with a positive attitude about aging are 44 percent more likely to recover from severe disability relating to falls or other age-related medical conditions. The overall recovery rate from severe disability is also much higher than is widely believed and indicates that most seniors can regain lost mobility and cognitive health with the proper therapy.

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Changing the Narrative on Aging

While most popular misconceptions about aging have been debunked by decades of research, the public pessimism about growing older seems hard to overcome. Though there are more seniors than at any other time in history, stereotypes about aging are still far too common in the popular media. And *internalizing* these stereotypes can have a major impact on physical and mental health as we grow older.

In many ways, *being pessimistic about aging can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to poorer cognitive and physical functioning, being less likely to have a healthy lifestyle, recovering more slowly from injuries or serious illness, and dying prematurely*. But not all the barriers faced by older adults are psychological. Age discrimination and prejudice against older adults is still far too common despite existing laws protecting older workers and retirees.

In their article, Manfred Diehl and his co-authors argue that much more can be done to combat ageism and help older adults live more independent lives. Not only do there need to be more workplace-based health and wellness programs aimed at older workers, but better support programs are needed for the millions of adults over 65 who are doing unpaid work caring for disabled spouses, parents, or children, as well as providing better access to medical care. And then there is the growing need to provide better education for middle-aged adults (aged 40 to 64), to help them make better plans for their later years, including avoiding the negative age stereotyping that might sabotage their future health.

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While there are always going to be medical challenges as people grow older, maintaining a good attitude about aging is essential in overcoming the fears that too many people have about becoming senior citizens. Perhaps more than ever before, people can take charge of their own aging and live longer and healthier lives than previous generations believed possible. But we also need to be more responsible about the health decisions we make and be willing to make the most of the opportunities that come our way.

References

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Diehl, M., Smyer, M. A., & Mehrotra, C. M. (2020). Optimizing aging: A call for a new narrative. *American Psychologist*, 75(4), 577–589. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000598>



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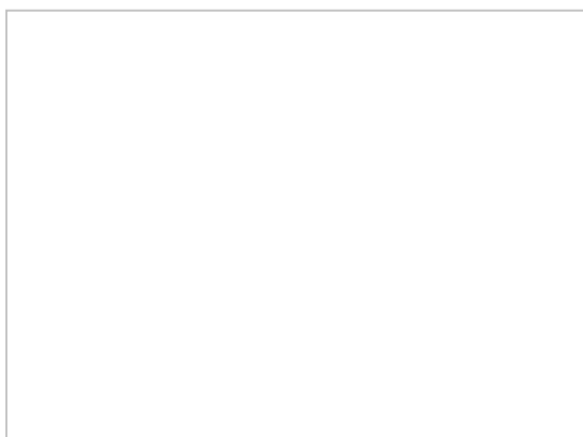
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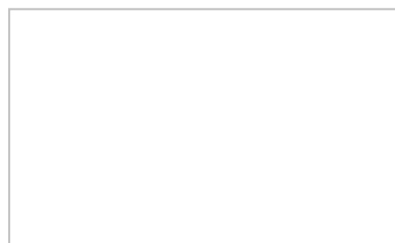
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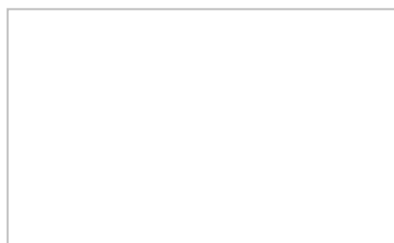


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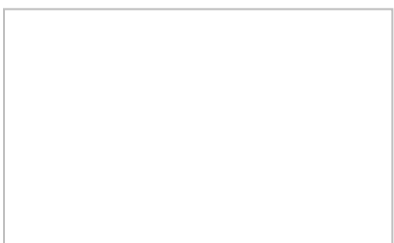
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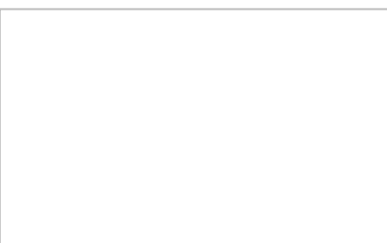
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