

Myths and Realities of Aging¹

Carolyn S. Wilken²

Overview

Americans view aging as a dreaded time of life. When we think about aging we focus on poor health. We worry about running out of money. We fear loneliness and death. We see birthdays as something to dread, not celebrate. We worry about being 'over the hill' or 'old and senile'. We turn down job applicants who are 'too old'. And we scoff at older adults who are 'in love'.

The negative beliefs and stereotypes we have about older adults are a form of prejudice called ageism. Ageism is very common in America. Like other forms of prejudice, ageism hurts both individuals and society. Ageism prevents people from reaching, or maintaining their full potential.

This fact sheet describes some of the prejudices our society has about aging. Ten of the most common myths of aging are explored. A description of what is really true follows each myth.

Myth #1 Senility is a Normal Part of Aging

Getting a little forgetful is a normal part of aging. It is normal to forget to stop for milk at the store, or to forget someone's name. It is not normal to become so forgetful that it is impossible to manage the tasks of everyday life.

Senility, or dementia as it is more commonly called today is a severe form of memory loss. It is not normal. There are a variety of causes of dementia. Some dementias are more severe than others. Some can even be reversed. Malnutrition, depression, dehydration, and drug interactions can all lead to dementia. Depression can be treated with talk therapy or medication, and the dementia from depression may be reversed. Once the person receives proper nutrition and or adequate liquids, the dementia may lift. Physicians should always be informed of all medications a person is taking to avoid the dementia that can result from bad combinations of drugs.

More severe and long-term forms of dementia are caused by diseases such as Parkinson's, Creutzfeldt Jakobs, strokes, or brain injuries. Alzheimer's disease is the most common kind of dementia and causes severe memory loss and confusion.

Alzheimer's disease creates physical changes in the brain that lead to severe dementia. People with Alzheimer's disease eventually fail to recognize their own family members. They even fail to recognize themselves. There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease and the cause is still unknown. But, Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging. Researchers estimate that about 4 million older adults have Alzheimer's disease. That means that 31 million older adults do not have Alzheimer's disease. It is true that the risk of developing Alzheimer's increases with age. Nearly

1. This document is FCS2193, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida: First published: June 1989. Reviewed: August 1999, March 2002. Revised: December 2002. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
2. Carolyn S. Wilken, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate professor, Family Life, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences/University of Florida/Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean.

one in three people over the age of 85 is a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Becoming old and senile is a myth. Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging.

Myth #2 Most old people are alone and lonely.

This is not true at all! Friends and family are very important in the lives of older adults. In fact, the number of close friends remains relatively stable throughout life. It's true, the number of casual friends may decrease, but the number of close friends stays the same. People who have many close friends throughout life continue to have many close friends as they age. Those who have only a small circle of friendships earlier in life, keep a small circle of friends later on.

Families remain close even in the later years. In fact, 80% of parents over the age of 65 see at least one of their adult children every 1 to 2 weeks. More than half of older parents have seen an adult child within the past 24 hours. Over 50% of all older adults live within a 10-minute drive of one or more of their grown children.

Grandparents also have frequent interactions with their grandchildren. Grandparent-grandchildren contacts are often centered on a special event such as attending a birthday party or school activity. Three out of four grandparents see their grandchildren at least every week or two. Half see their grandchildren every few days.

Myth #3: Most old people are in poor health.

Another myth of aging is that being old means being sick. Yes, physical changes occur with age. Thinning hair and sagging skin are normal physical changes that happen with age. Older adults have a higher risk of developing certain diseases. Arthritis, heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, and cancer are more common among older adults than younger people. But even when they have one of those diseases, older adults make changes in their lives so they can remain independent.

In general, older people describe themselves as pretty healthy. More than two-thirds of people over 65 years of age told researchers that they are in good, very good, or excellent health. More than half of

those over 85 years of age said that they are in good, very good, or excellent health

Myth #4: Old people are more likely to be victims of crime.

The notion that older people are "prisoners in their own homes" because they are afraid of crime is a great exaggeration.

In fact, older adults are less likely than younger people to be robbed, assaulted, or raped. In spite of this reality, older adults are more fearful of crime. There are good reasons to be afraid. Crime is a serious problem in many neighborhoods. In those neighborhoods, everyone is at risk, not just older people.

Many older adults are afraid because they live alone in urban or inner city neighborhoods or are alone out on the farm or ranch. Older adults fear they could not defend themselves because they are not as strong as an attacker might be. They are afraid that they cannot run fast enough to get away safely.

The truth is that older adults are more at risk of crime at the hands of their family members or caregivers than from strangers. Family members or caregivers may physically abuse or steal from an older adult in their care.

Myth #5: Most older people live in poverty.

In 1959, one in three older adults lived in poverty. That is why the federal government improved Social Security and strengthened the laws protecting private pensions. Medicare, and programs for nutrition, housing, and transportation were also developed in the 1960s to help older Americans. Those programs have been very successful in reducing poverty among the elderly. Today only one in ten older adults lives in poverty.

Myth #6: Elders become more religious with age.

Not true. The Lifetime Stability Theory predicts that people generally remain the same throughout their lives. This simply means that if someone is religious during their early adulthood, they will most likely be religious as older adults. They didn't

more religious just because they got older. They were always religious. The same applies to those who are not religious. People who are not committed to religious practices throughout their lives are not likely to become involved in religious activities simply because they are older. Research has found a slight decrease in organized religious activities among older adults who were actively involved in their religion in their younger years. Older adults may be less involved in religious activities because of transportation problems such as difficulty driving at night. They may also have problems getting into places of worship because of stairs. When they are not able to attend and participate in religious activities, older adults find other ways to worship. They spend more time reading, watching religious programs on television or listening to religious programs on the radio.

Myth #7: Older workers are less productive than younger workers.

Employers know that this is simply not true. Nearly half of all American businesses employ retired workers. Older employees produce high quality work. They draw on years of experience to solve problems. Older workers are known to be highly motivated, are flexible about work schedules, and have low rates of absenteeism. Given the opportunity, older workers are excellent mentors for younger workers.

Myth #8: Retirees suffer decline in health and early death.

Thinking back on how retirement used to be it is easy to understand how this myth got started. In fact, until recent years, this myth was really a fact. Early in the 20th century, life expectancy was about 46 years. In 1900, an American male's life span included 8 years of education, 32 years of work and just over one year of retirement. Today, with a life span of nearly 74 years, an adult is more like to work a few more year—39 versus 32 years—but can expect to spend nearly 14 years in retirement.

Most of those years are spent in good health. In fact, millions of people retire, take a few months or year off, and then return to the work force. Others, who retire from stressful or dangerous jobs, find retirement a healthy choice. In the early years of the 21st Century, older Americans can look forward to longer lives, more years spent in retirement and better health than ever before.

Myth #9: Most old people have no interest in or capacity for sexual relations.

Just like many other aspects of life, sexual behavior in later life mirrors sexual behaviors in young and middle adulthood. Researchers have found that good health, not age, is the key to sexual relationships throughout life. The way older adults express sexuality may change over the years. In later years, older adults may prefer touching and cuddling to maintain sexual intimacy.

Myth #10: Most old people end up in nursing homes.

This is perhaps one of the greatest untruths about aging. Fears of aging and the media continue to feed this untruth. The reality is that on any given day, only about 5% of older adults are living in a nursing home, or long-term care facility. Nursing homes today are more likely to be rehabilitation centers where people stay to recover from a stroke, heart attack, or fall. In fact, 25% of older adults may temporarily move to a long-term care facility for rehabilitation. They live in the nursing home for a short period of time—from a few days to a few months—and then return home again. Currently, three out of every four Americans will never reside in a nursing home. Older adults remain in their homes, in their communities. Their families and friends, with the help of community services, provide the kinds of support they need to remain at home.

References

- Kart, C. S. 1997. *The realities of aging: An introduction to gerontology*. 5th Edition. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Moody, H.R. 2002. *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*. 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press.