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The Later Years – Some Myths and Realities  
Michigan State University Extension Service  
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# THE LATER YEARS of LIFE

## 5.

### Some Myths and Realities

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**A**ging is a normal, lifelong process that begins at birth. Yet, we often tend to see it as a discrete phenomenon. You either are, or you aren't, a "senior citizen."

More than 20 million Americans currently make up that population. In this bulletin, we will explore some of the mistaken ideas we have about the later years. We will also examine the realities, including the fact that we retain our individuality as we move to the plus side of 65. At that time, we are no more like or different from others than we were at 10, 27, or 64; we are only older, a natural condition that is true of every one of us with each tick of the clock. Most of us don't consider ourselves among the aged until the later years are well upon us.

Moreover, our perceptions of those later years depend upon our own lifelong experiences with the aged population, as well as upon the way we have seen older persons portrayed in the media. Test your own knowledge and attitudes about the later years by checking the following myths and realities.

### Some Common Myths About Elderly Persons

Most old people live in institutions.

Most old people are alike.

Most old people are to be tolerated or pitied.

Most are sick, friendless, and without resources.

Most are handicapped by chronic disease.

Most lose contact with their families.

Old people have a different sense of sexuality.

Married couples are closer in their retirement years.

There's no fool like an old fool, especially when he/she's in love!

Dissatisfaction in the later years is inevitable.

Disengagement is a natural process for older people.

Old people prefer to live with their adult children.

Being around old people is depressing.

### What Are The Realities?

#### NUMBERS

Since 1900, the U.S. population has doubled and the 65+ age group has quadrupled.

In 1941, 7% of the population was 65 or over. By 1980, it was 11%, more than 24 million people.

By 2020, 16% of the population will be 65 or older, or 8 million more people over 65 than there are teenagers. Women can expect to live an average of 80 years. The average age of retirement may drop to 60, or perhaps 55; if so, about one-quarter of our lives will be spent in retirement.

Of the aged poor, 65 percent are women; 25 percent of all older Americans live below the poverty threshold. They make up only 10 percent of the population, however.

Approximately 5 percent of the elderly are housebound or institutionalized in hospitals, homes for the aged, and nursing homes. Ninety-five percent live in the community.

More than 1 million persons retire each year.

About 60 percent of older Americans (over 60) are in good health.

#### PEOPLE

Though many are mentally and physically willing to do volunteer work in the community, few are asked to do so.

Older persons today are better educated and more physically capable than ever before.

They vary by age, sex, physical ability, education, social class, income and outlook on life.

They are the wealthiest and the poorest, the deepest concerned, but least engaged, the most committed and most alienated (Kent, 1968).

Most look to themselves and their own resources and then to government programs.

Most keep in close contact with their relatives.

Most prefer to live apart from their children but close enough to maintain contact.

Freedom of choice and participation in their future is important to elderly persons.

Many older persons dislike being referred to as "senior citizens" or "the elderly." They prefer to retain individual identity: "Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_; Mr. \_\_\_\_\_; Miss \_\_\_\_\_."

Intelligence and learning ability hold up fairly well unless there is a serious breakdown in health.

**By Anne K. Soderman**

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In cooperation with  
the Human Development  
Impact Committee

Many elderly do have the inner resources and capacity to develop new interests, but they may need help in finding those interests.

Disengagement, or social withdrawal, may not be an inevitable process but a function of a culture which has few expectations for older persons and limits their resources.

Marriage relationships in the later years have the potential of being more fulfilling but are not necessarily any happier than are marriages of younger persons.

Older persons marry for the same reasons as do young people: companionship, romantic love, sexual expression, poor health (to have someone care for them), financial reasons, and to avoid being dependent (on children).

Social needs are the same for the aged as for all people.

There is great social pressure against older people remarrying.

Careful studies have shown that there is no systematic change in personality over the life span.

### Resources and Recommended Reading

Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Lewis. **Sex After Sixty.** New York: Harper and Row, 1976, 165 pp.

Robert N. Butler. **Why Survive? Being Old in America.** New York: Harper and Row, 1975, 422 pp.

**Growing Old...A Guide For Understanding and Help.** American Occupational Therapy Foundation. 1383 Piccard Dr., Suite 201, Rockville, MD 20850 (Pamphlet, 25¢).

D.P. Kent. "Aging within the American Social Structure," **Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry**, Vol. 21, No. 1, Fall 1968.

G.F. Streib and R.W. Beck. Older Families: A Decade Review. **Journal of Marriage and The Family**, November 1980.

## A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR SENIORS

If one were to look for any similarities in elderly Americans, indeed, in all Americans, it might be the rights they have as citizens in our country. According to the 1961 White House Conference, each of our senior citizens, regardless of race, color, or creed, is entitled to:

**The right to be useful.**

**The right to obtain employment, based on merit.**

**The right to freedom from want in old age.**

**The right to a fair share of the community's recreational, educational and medical resources.**

**The right to obtain decent housing suited to the needs of the later years.**

**The right to the moral and financial support of one's family so far as is consistent with the best interest of the family.**

**The right to live independently, as one chooses.**

**The right to live and die with dignity.**

**The right of access to all knowledge available on how to improve the later years of life.**

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