

## Myths and Stereotypes of Aging



Here, we debunk some of the most common misconceptions about growing older.

Forget what your driver's license says and the ideals of eternal youth plastered all over the media. We're in the midst of a revolution when it comes to how we view aging. Not only are people living longer, they're staying healthy longer and working longer too. The wealth of knowledge and experience that older adults have to offer is finally being recognized again.

Unfortunately, there are still many misconceptions about what it means to "grow old". Ageist stereotypes about seniors are unfortunately pervasive in our culture. In films, on television and even in the jokes we hear, misconceptions about aging and seniors are ever present. Some of the top myths and stereotypes of aging include:

### ***1. Myth: Aging Dulls Wits***

While aging can create cognitive changes, older people may perform better in certain areas of intelligence and poorer in others.

While seniors may have slower reaction times, “mental capabilities that depend most heavily on accumulated experience and knowledge, like settling disputes and enlarging one’s vocabulary, clearly get better over time,” writes Patricia Cohen in the New York Times.

## ***2. Myth: Aging Erases Your Libido***

Discussing the love and sex lives of seniors is largely taboo and has led to the stereotype that the elderly are sexless. This stereotype is harmful because it can cause seniors to have conflicted feelings or unnecessary guilt about their sexuality, while simultaneously causing younger people to hold misconceptions about aging and the elderly. As a state of Oregon document notes: “Research has found that sexual activity and enjoyment do not decrease with age. People with physical health, a sense of well-being and a willing partner are more likely to continue sexual relations. People who are bored with their partner, mentally or physically tired, afraid of failure or overindulge in food or drink are unlikely to engage in sexual activity. These reasons do not differ a great deal when considering whether or not a person will engage in sex at any age.

## ***3. Myth: Aging is Depressing***

Contrary to the myth that aging is depressing, many studies find that seniors are among the happiest age group. Happiness levels by age follow a U-shaped curve, with self-reported levels of happiness at their lowest at age 40, but then growing thereafter.

## ***4. Myth: Aging Leads to Loneliness***

Though social isolation can be a problem for seniors, especially to those who have limited mobility, most seniors are able to stay socially engaged. Activities with family and friends and visits at places such as the local senior center or a place of worship, also help seniors stay active and happy.

## ***5. Myth: Aging Makes You Less Creative***

There are countless examples that dispel the myth that aging makes you less creative. In fact, many artists actually find their calling or achieve mastery in their later years. A great example is American artist “Grandma Moses,” who held her first one-woman art show in 1940 when she was 80 and continued to paint until she was 101.

## ***6. Myth: Aging Makes You More Religious***

Seniors certainly have a higher rate of religious attendance, but this is a generational phenomenon rather than an aging phenomenon. If you regularly attended church growing up, you're likely to continue to do so as you age. Today's seniors haven't become more religious with time. Instead, they grew up in a time when more people went to church, which is why seniors are the most religious age group.

## ***7. Myth: Aging Makes You Unable to Adapt to New Situations***

Older people are not only able to adapt to new situations, they are actually experts at adapting. By the time one has become a senior, they have had to adapt to innumerable changes and transitions in life. Seniors may be slower to change their opinions, but one of humanity's greatest traits, adaptability, is generally retained as we grow old.

## ***8. Myth: Aging Makes You Unproductive***

Though retired people may have left the workforce, they are hardly unproductive. They contribute countless hours to activities like helping with child-rearing and volunteering, which makes an enormous impact on society. In fact, a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates 24% of senior citizens report engaging in volunteer work after retirement.

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