

Opinion: Age-ing or Sage-ing? It's time to focus on the positive aspects of getting older

Disempowering attitudes towards ageing are pervasive in our culture, leading to the more positive dimensions of ageing getting lost.



IN OUR YOUTH-ORIENTATED culture, disempowering attitudes towards ageing are pervasive. Getting older is associated with slowing down, becoming unattractive, isolated, lonely and ill, and with losing our engagement in and enjoyment of life. These negative associations are reinforced by the endless marketing of “anti-ageing” products, diets and medical procedures that promise to stave off the seemingly inevitable decline into marginalisation, depression and loss.

Such stereotypes of ageing are outdated, inaccurate and do not reflect the reality of life for the vast majority of older people. Not only do we have control over many aspects of ageing, but there are numerous positive dimensions to ageing that get lost in the barrage of negativity.

Wellbeing in older age

Far from being depressed, the over-55s report the highest level of life satisfaction of all age groups. A number of factors contribute to this enhanced level of wellbeing.

Relieved of the pressures and responsibilities of childrearing, older people often enjoy better relationships with their adult children and can gain great satisfaction from their relationships with their grandchildren. They are less constricted by the roles that they had to fulfill in their earlier years, whether at home, socially or in the workplace, allowing them to become more “their own person”.

Ageing brings a depth of wisdom, insight and understanding that can only come through life experience. People tend to become more compassionate and less judgemental of both themselves and others as they age, realising that making mistakes is an inevitable, and indeed essential, part of life.

Getting older can bring greater confidence and release people from anxious concerns about how they are seen by others, allowing them more personal freedom. They worry less, partly due to having fewer responsibilities, but also through discovering that allowing life to unfold without too much interference often leads to the best results. They stress less about small things and are able to see a bigger picture.

Demographic factors

Populations are ageing and the birth rate continues to decrease. For the first time in history, couples have more living parents than children. Sociologists refer to this as the “demographic time bomb”, asserting that a country top-heavy with older people will create a “social burden” for the shrinking younger population to carry. In reality, only a tiny percentage of older people require expensive, long-term care.

The vast majority of seniors are healthy, active and productive members of society. Far from being receivers of social care, they are net providers, through the help they give to their families, their local communities and through volunteering and other civic activities. They offer a growing market for providers of adult education, sporting and cultural activities and are free to contribute their time and experience to political, spiritual and charitable causes. An older population will engage in less crime and create greater social capital, meaning more interconnectness through informal networks which provide the “social glue” that keeps communities together.

Staying healthy as we age

The “baby boomer” generation will be the healthiest and most active group to ever enter the “third age”, as life post-retirement is now called. Advances in medical science, as well as increased awareness about the importance of diet, exercise and other lifestyle factors, means that physical health and ability does not have to decline significantly as we age.

Access to information and communication through the internet and mobile phones breaks down isolation and empowers older people to develop new skills and interests. Keeping mentally and physically active, not smoking, drinking in moderation, exercising regularly and eating fresh, unprocessed food have all been shown to have measurable effects in maintaining lifelong cognitive abilities and physical health.

By keeping a positive attitude and seeing ageing as an opportunity to exercise a new-found freedom, we can ensure that our options and possibilities expand rather than shrink as we age.

*Maeve Halpin is a counselling psychologist in private practice in Dublin. Her recent book *How to be Happy and Healthy – the [Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health](#)* is published by Ashfield Press. Sign up for Maeve's blog at www.maevehalpinbooks.com*

*Maeve Halpin and Dr Edmond O'Flaherty are giving a free talk on their book, *How to be Happy and Healthy – the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health* in Waterstones Cork on Thursday Jan 29th, 7-8pm. All welcome, no booking required.*