

Autumn's Varied Shades

Aging in America

By Jill Darling Richardson



The population of America is aging. The leading edge of the the Baby Boom generation is entering its mid-fifties. Advances in medicine and healthier lifestyles have led to longer, more active lives after retirement. Old age has become, for some, another lengthy stage of life, one with its own problems and concerns, but also one that offers unique opportunities for satisfaction and fulfillment.

In the fall of 1999, the *Los Angeles Times* polled the nation, including an oversample of those over age 60, to explore current attitudes on aging in America. What do young people think about getting older? What is considered the ideal age? Do old people think more about death than the young? Are the elderly lonely and depressed? With post-60 living encompassing up to a third of our lives, what insights do seniors have for Boomers and others about what lies ahead for them?

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According to the 1999 AARP *Profile of Older Americans*, about three in ten Americans over age 65 live alone. One in ten struggles below the poverty line, nearly one in three reports their own health as only fair or poor, and over a third reports being limited by chronic health problems. These are disturbing numbers, and, indeed, 13% of respondents in the *Times* survey said they were frightened by the thought of growing old, including 18% of those under 40.

But most Boomers hold a more positive outlook on the aging process. In fact, seniors themselves are feeling pretty good about life. Despite some health concerns, older survey respondents painted a rosy picture of the last decades of life and expressed little fear of what lies ahead. When asked whether they look forward to growing older, over two-thirds of those in their 70s and 80s responded positively, compared with 65% in their 60s and 55% of those 59 or younger.

The older you are the less frightening the prospect of growing older becomes. When asked specifically, "Does the thought of getting old frighten you, or are you looking forward to getting old?" only 9% of respondents 70 or older indicated that the



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thought was alarming. This compares favorably with the one in eight between the ages of 40 and 70, and the one in five under 40, who said they find the prospect of getting old frightening.

Put another way, survey respondents under 60 were asked, "When you are old, however you define that, do you expect your life will be better than it is now, worse than it is now, or about the same?" Forty-six percent responded that life will be better. Another four in ten said they believed life will remain about the same, and only 10% said they expected the worst.

This expectation is validated by experience, according to those over 60. This group was asked, "Now that you are older, do you think your life is better than it was when you were younger, or worse than it was or about the same as it was when you were younger?" Thirty-six percent responded life is better now, and 41% said life has stayed about the same. Fourteen percent of those in their 60s said life is worse than it was when they were younger. That figure increased to 20% among seniors over 70, while the proportion of those who said life is better decreased to 35%.

Older Americans' responses tell us there are many reasons not to dread old age. About nine in ten seniors expressed satisfaction with the way their lives are going, including 34% who said they are "entirely satisfied" and another 43% who said they are "mostly satisfied." This is a higher degree of satisfaction than

expressed by people under 60, only 26% of whom said they are entirely satisfied with their lives.

Seniors don't spend time wishing they'd done things differently, either. Answering the question, "Looking back over your life, are there any regrets or things you wanted to do and have not done, or anything you wanted to say to someone that you have not said?" 66% over 60 said they had no regrets.

When asked if they thought that the best years of a person's life are before age 50, two out of every three respondents younger than 50 (including 72% of those under thirty) responded that they thought they were currently living out their best years. Quite a few of those over 50, however, disagreed. A plurality of these elders maintained that it is not all downhill after 50, with 39% saying that the best years come later.

Perhaps resisting the stereotype of frail and worn bodies, people over 60 were very likely to say they look and feel younger than they actually are. Nearly two out of three respondents over 60 said they feel they look younger than their actual age. And, when asked how old they feel on most days, the vast majority of those over 60 said they feel much younger than they are.

Interestingly, while respondents' perceived age was younger than their actual age across all age groups, the difference between real and perceived ages remained stable until the

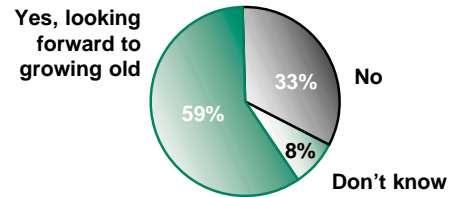
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As Old As You Feel

Question: If you could choose your ideal age, how old would you like to be?

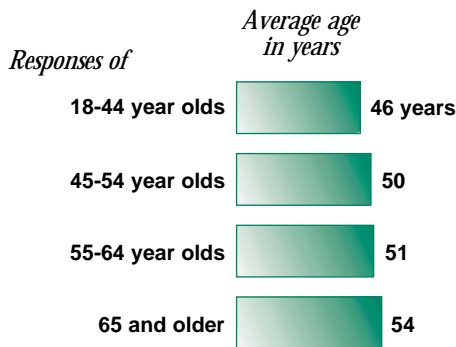
Responses of	Ideal age			
	25 or younger	26-40	41-50	Over 50
18-44 year olds	40%	41%	6%	6%
45-54 year olds	15	42	22	13
55-64 year olds	9	39	14	29
65 and older	12	21	16	36

Question: Are you looking forward to growing older, or not?



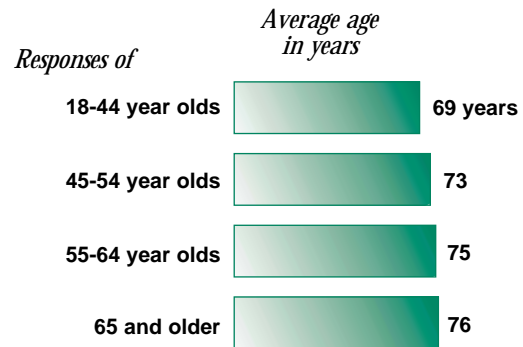
You're Middle-Aged When...

Question: At what age do you think someone becomes middle-aged?

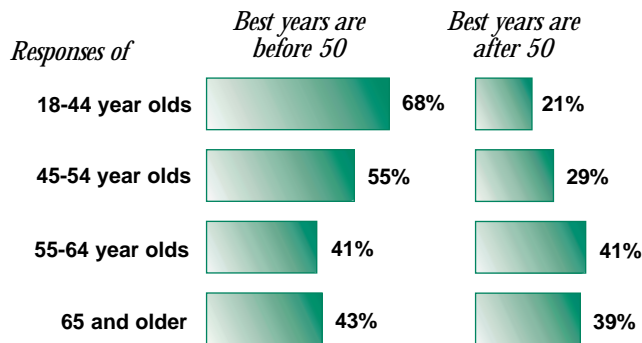


You're Old When...

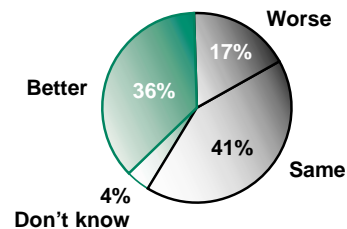
Question: At what age do you consider someone to be elderly?



Question: Generally speaking, do you think the best years of a person's life are before age 50 or after age 50?



Question: Now that you are older, do you think your life is better than it was when you were younger, or worse than it was or about the same as it was when you were younger?



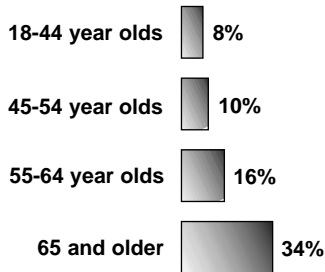
Note: Responses of those 60 years of age or older.

Source: All data on this page are from a survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, October 20-23, 1999.

Twilight Time

Question: ...Who do you live with? Do you live with your spouse or partner, or with your children, or with another family member, or with a friend, or do you live alone?

Percent responding they live alone



Question: How often are you lonely? Would you say very often, or fairly often, or fairly seldom, or would you say you are very seldom lonely?

Percent responding lonely
Often Seldom Never (vol.)

Responses of	Often	Seldom	Never (vol.)
18-44 year olds	13%	78%	8%
45-54 year olds	10	75	15
55-64 year olds	12	71	16
65 and older	11	72	16

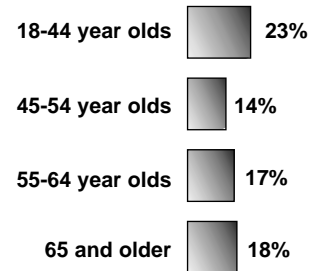
Question: How often are you depressed? Would you say very often, or fairly often, or fairly seldom, or would you say you are very seldom depressed?

Percent responding depressed
Often Seldom Never (vol.)

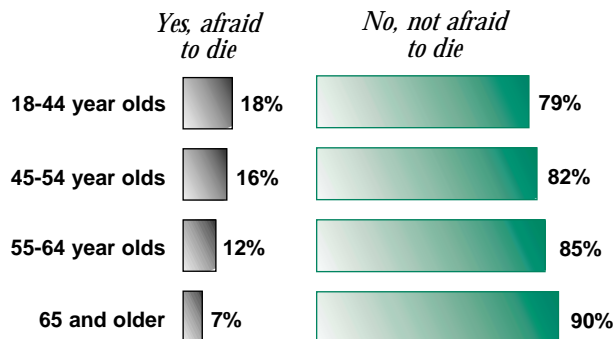
Responses of	Often	Seldom	Never (vol.)
18-44 year olds	15%	81%	4%
45-54 year olds	9	86	4
55-64 year olds	8	80	12
65 and older	9	75	15

Question: Most people think about death sometimes. Do you think about death very often, or fairly often, or fairly seldom, or very seldom?

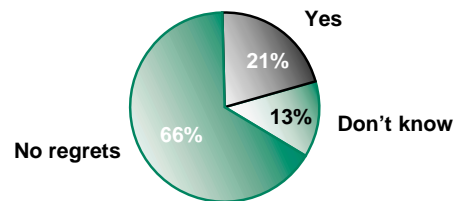
Percent responding very or fairly often



Question: Are you afraid to die, or not?



Question: Looking back over your life, are there any regrets, or things you wanted to do and have not done, or anything you wanted to say to someone that you have not said?...



Note: Responses of those 60 years of age or older.

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Continued from page 29.

latest years. The survey found people in their 60s and 70s feel an average of 15 years younger than they actually are, while respondents in their 80s feel an average of 22 years younger. Only about two in ten of those over 60 said they feel their own age. No one said they felt older.

Some other negative stereotypes about aging came into play, especially for older respondents, when asked, “What does getting old mean to you personally?” While 22% of those over 60 said getting old means having more leisure and family time, 33% said being old means illness and disability or loss of independence, compared to just under a quarter of younger people thinking so. Loneliness and loss through death was mentioned by only a small proportion of any respondents, but twice as many elderly worried about isolation than did their younger counterparts.

On a more positive note, 12% of those under 60 thought getting older means “becoming wiser,” “feeling more contented,” and “enjoying life’s achievements.” Perhaps because they did become wiser, or perhaps because the idea of advancing age bringing wisdom fades with one’s hair, only 3% over age 60 expected to become more sage and content with age.

One thing that has not changed recently is the perception of seniors’ sex lives. In 1989, when the *Times* poll asked, “How many people over 65 do you think have active sexual lives—almost all of them, or about half of them or a few of them, or almost none of them?” about six in ten thought that half or more of seniors have active sex lives. When the current survey repeated the item, that figure was essentially unchanged.

And, indeed, when older respondents—those over 60—were asked about satisfaction with their own sex lives, 52% said they were very or somewhat satisfied. This included 61% of those in their 60s, 56% of those in their 70s and 29% of those in their 80s. Including those saying “not dissatisfied,” three out of four respondents over 60 gave a positive assessment of their sex lives. By comparison, 77% who are younger than 60 expressed some degree of satisfaction.

Interestingly, about the same proportion (15% and 16% respectively) of younger and older respondents said they were “extremely satisfied,” indicating, one might postulate, that the perfect sex life is elusive at any age.

Despite the occasional heart-wrenching report of elderly shut-ins who see no one from day-to-day, the reality among a majority of our respondents was quite different [although it should be noted this survey, and any other that relies on the telephone, may under-represent the most frail elderly who reside in care homes or anywhere they are not provided with individual telephone numbers]. Older respondents who are retired reported being quite

active—only 7% of those over 60, 19% of those over 70, and 29% of those over 80 reported that they hadn’t participated in at least one activity (such as meals with friends or relatives or volunteer work) outside their homes in the previous week. Only 4% of the oldest respondents (those over 80) reported being too ill to leave the house.

“Old age has become, for some, another lengthy stage of life, one with its own problems and concerns, but also one that offers unique opportunities for satisfaction and fulfillment.”

Older respondents also reported being lonely in smaller proportion than those under 30. Nearly one in five of these younger respondents said they are often lonely, compared to one in ten in their 60s and 70s, and one in seven in their 80s. The older you are, the more likely you are to say you are *never* lonely, doubling from about one in ten among those under 50 to two in ten among those over 80.

A discussion of aging might well conclude with attitudes toward death. The responses to, “Do you think about death very often, or fairly often, or fairly seldom, or very seldom?” were rather surprising: apparently, the younger you are, the more likely you are to think about death.

The proportion of those who never or very seldom think about death decreased from a high of 64% among those over 40 to 49% of those younger than 40. However, most people, regardless of age, don’t spend much time thinking about death. Only 9% overall said they think about their demise “very” often.

Likewise, most people aren’t afraid to die. Just over 80% overall said that death holds little fear for them. Younger respondents tend to be more fearful—more than two in ten of those under 40, compared with just about one in ten of those in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, and only a handful over 70, said they are afraid to die.

Altogether, the nation’s seniors are finding their twilight years better than conventional wisdom predicts. The message back to the inexorably aging Boomers from their older counterparts is a positive one: You won’t look or feel as old as you are. Life may get a little better, and you won’t have many regrets. You’ll be pretty satisfied with your sex life. However, while you will gain experience, wisdom may likely remain elusive. ●