

# Fear of aging is really a fear of the unknown and modern society is making things worse, say researchers

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For the first time in human history, we have entered an era in which reaching old age is taken for granted. Unlike in ages past, when living to an older age was a luxury afforded mainly to the privileged, globally around [79% of women](#) and [70% of men](#) can expect to reach the age of 65 and beyond.

Despite longer life expectancy, many people in the contemporary west

see growing old as undesirable and [even scary](#). Research shows, however, that anxiety about aging may in fact be [fear of the unknown](#).

Society's [focus on youthfulness](#) and [capability](#) can cause anxiety about becoming weak and unwanted. Adverts for anti-aging products are everywhere, reinforcing the idea that growing older is inherently unattractive.

Some people fear aging so much that it becomes a pathological condition [called gerascophobia](#), leading to irrational thoughts and behavior, for example, a fixation on health, illness and mortality and a preoccupation with hiding the signs of aging.

We frequently hear about attempts to reverse aging, often by the super rich. For example, [Bryan Johnson](#), a 45-year-old American entrepreneur, is spending millions of dollars a year to obtain the physical age of 18.

While the desire to reverse aging is not a new phenomenon, advancements in biomedicine have brought it closer.

Work published by genetics professor [David Sinclair](#) at Harvard University in 2019 suggests that it may be possible to challenge the limits of cell reproduction to extend our lifespan, for example. His [information theory of aging](#) argues that [reprogramming DNA](#) can improve damaged and old tissues, and delay or even reverse aging. However, these new possibilities can also heighten our fear of aging.

## **From the unproductive to undervalued**

People haven't always dreaded growing older. In many societies, older people used to be widely regarded as wise and important—and in some they still are.

In ancient China, there was a [culture](#) of respecting and seeking advice from older family members. There is still an ethos of [filial piety](#) (showing reverence and care for elders and ancestors) today, even if it's not as pronounced as it used to be. The same went for [medieval Europe](#), where older people's experiences and wisdom were highly valued.

However, the [industrial revolution](#) in the west from the 18th century led to a cultural shift where older people [became excluded from society](#) and were considered unproductive. People who had surpassed the age to work, alongside those with incurable diseases, were regarded by society as "[evils](#)" in need of assistance.

The treatment of older people has taken a different form since the early 20th century. The introduction of [universal pension systems](#) made aging a central concern in welfare systems. But as the demands for social and [health care](#) have increased, journalists increasingly portray aging as a [burden](#) on society.

Consequently, growing older is often associated with managing the risk of ill health and alleviating the onus of care from younger relatives. This can result in the [institutionalization](#) of older people in residential facilities that keep them hidden, sequestered from the awareness of [younger generations](#).

[Research](#) analyzing the responses of 1,200 US adults from the American Association of Retired Persons' Images of Aging survey shows that much of the perceived fear of aging is closely aligned with the fear of the unknown, rather than the aging process itself. This fear is only exacerbated by the largely separate lives lived by older and younger generations.

The prevalence of nuclear families and the decline of [traditional mixed-generational communities](#) have deprived younger people of the

opportunity to more fully understand the experiences of older people. Plus, the rapid increase in [house prices](#) means many young people cannot afford to live near their older relatives.

The separation of older people from children and young people has sparked generational conflicts that seemingly continue to [grow wider than ever](#). Older people are frequently portrayed in the media as conservative and privileged, [making it difficult](#) for younger generations to comprehend why older people act and think the way they do.

## **Intergenerational interactions**

Academics suggest that creating [a system](#) for older and younger generations to interact in everyday settings is vital.

A set of three [UK-based studies](#) in 2016 analyzed and compared the effects of direct contact, extended contact and interactions between younger (aged 17 to 30) and older people (65 and over). The findings indicated that good quality direct intergenerational contact can improve young people's attitudes towards older adults (especially when sustained over time).

Intergenerational programs have been adopted globally, including mixed and [intergenerational housing](#), [community choirs](#) and [senior volunteers reading to young children in nurseries](#).

[Studies show](#) that these activities can not only enhance the well-being of older people but also help younger people gain an appreciation of aging as a valuable and fulfilling life stage.

Getting worried about growing older is normal, just as we experience anxieties in other stages of life, such as adolescence and marriage. But here's the thing—instead of seeing aging as a looming figure, it is

important to realize it is just a part of life.

Once we understand aging as a regular experience, [we can let go](#) of these worries and approach the journey through different life stages with a positive attitude and a fortified will to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us.

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