

## **Age is just a number:**

Views among people aged 50 and over in the  
English Longitudinal Study of Ageing

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Centre for Ageing Better

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# Background

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At the Centre for Ageing Better, our mission is to bring about change to improve later lives.

One aspect of this is to address ageist attitudes that result in negative stereotyping, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices.

Ageism is real: it is manifest in the way older people are portrayed in the media and it plays out with people not getting jobs because they're perceived to be too old. Ageism even has serious health consequences, including lowered levels of self-efficacy and physical function as well as cardiovascular stress and memory loss (Levy, 1996). Data presented recently at the launch of Wave 8 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) showed that perceived age discrimination is significantly associated with an increased risk of serious disease over 6 years of follow-up.

Faced with overwhelmingly negative attitudes about ageing in day-to-day life, it is unsurprising that older people themselves start applying ageist attitudes to other older people, and indeed to themselves. And negative self-perceptions of ageing are also detrimental: people with positive self-perceptions of ageing live on average 7.5 years longer than those with negative self-perceptions (Levy, 2002).

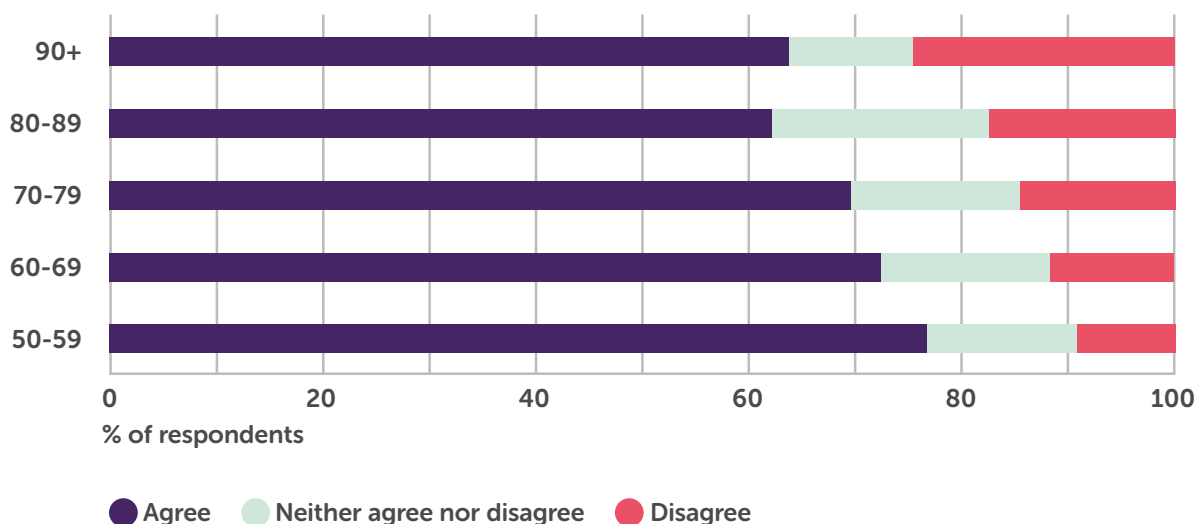
In order to understand and tackle ageist attitudes, we commissioned NatCen to conduct research on data from Wave 8 (collected 2016-17) of ELSA to examine views about ageing in the current population of people aged 50 and over in England.

# Findings

In this first part of our analysis, we look at how people responded to various questions about growing older and their concerns for the future.

We found that among more than 6000 people aged 50+ in ELSA Wave 8, almost three-quarters (72%) do not think of themselves as old while just 13% do. Even among 80-89-year-olds, 63% do not think of themselves as old (**Figure 1**). Of course, we have to bear in the mind that the 80-89-year-olds who are still taking part in ELSA are likely to be a healthier and more active group than this age group in the population more generally. So, they may not be entirely representative.

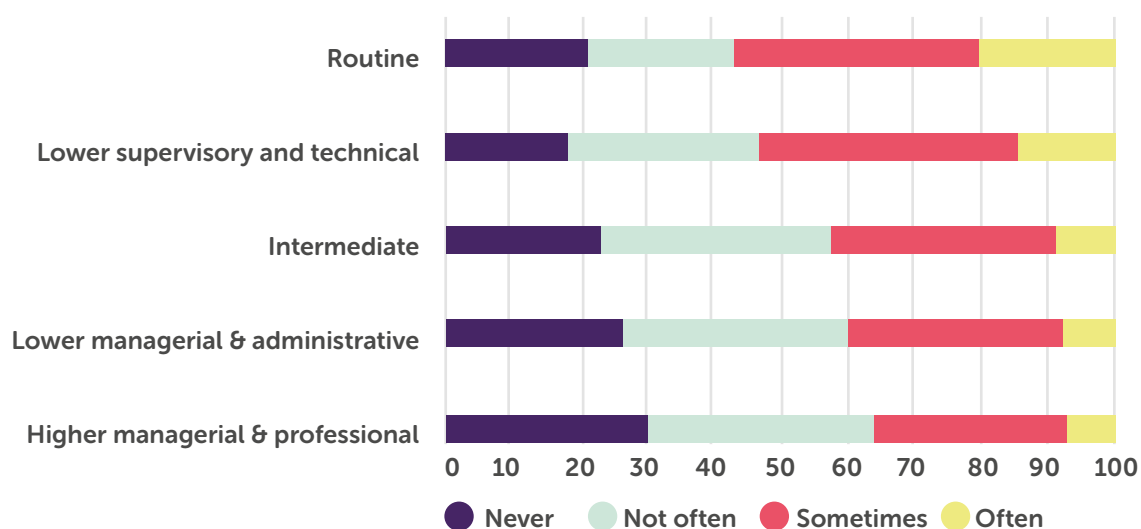
**Figure 1. Responses (%) to: To what extent do you agree or disagree with 'I don't think of myself as old' by age group, ELSA Wave 8**



Only 10% of people feel that their age often prevents them from doing the things they would like to do. However, the proportion differs by occupational status<sup>1</sup>, with one in five (20%) people in routine occupations feeling that their age often prevents them from doing the things they would like to compared with just 7% of those in higher managerial and professional occupations (**Figure 2**). Conversely, 30% of those in higher managerial and professional occupations feel that their age never prevents them from doing the things they would like compared with 18% of those in lower supervisory and technical roles. These findings are consistent with research on social class more generally, which indicates that those in so-called higher social groups have greater agency to do what they want in their lives.

<sup>1</sup> The UK National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification (NS-SEC) was used as a measure of social class in this analysis. This is an occupationally-based classification whereby various characteristics of an individual's occupation (whether current or most recent) collected in ELSA were used to derive a variable with eight possible values – (1) higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations; (2) lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations; (3) intermediate occupations; (4) small employers and small account workers; (5) lower supervisory and technical occupations; (6) semi-routine occupations; (7) routine occupations; and (8) never worked and long-term unemployed. Categories represent current occupational status if the person is still working and most recent if retired.

**Figure 2. Responses (%) to: 'My age prevents me from doing the things I would like to' by occupational status, ELSA Wave 8**



When asked whether 'on the whole, has growing older been a positive or negative experience?' 60% of people responded that it has been very or mainly positive and just 7% very or mainly negative. This varies by marital status: 47% of single people and 53% of divorced people have found growing older very or mainly positive compared with 66% of married people.

Also indicative of a broadly positive outlook is the fact that more than half (52%) of people aged 50+ say that growing old doesn't bother them and nearly half of respondents (49%) say they are more tolerant as they age. About four-fifths (81%) of respondents do not agree with the statement that 'old people are generally grumpy and miserable' and 90% agree there is a lot to learn from older people.

It's interesting to note that while people have a generally positive attitude towards ageing as it pertains to their lives in the present, they do have concerns when they consider the future: so while 32% of people aged 50+ agree that old age (in general) is a time of loneliness, 41% expect that they themselves will get lonelier as they get older. And while half of people aged 50+ agree that old age is a time of ill health, a much higher proportion – 70% – worry that their own health will get worse as they age.

Views on these questions vary by certain characteristics of the respondents. Worsening health is a bigger worry for people living on their own – 80% of separated people compared with 69% of married people. 10% of people in routine occupations expect to get lonelier as they get older compared with just 4% in high-status occupations. And while 10% of those in higher managerial occupations are of the opinion that old age is a time of ill health, this is the case for 19% of those in routine occupations. These data reflect the reality that the burden of ill health is, in fact, higher among the least advantaged social classes.

In the second part of our analysis, we investigated associations between having a positive or negative experience of ageing and demographic characteristics such as marital and

occupational status as well as responses to other questions in the survey (see the results of the **logistic regression analysis** in the table at the end of this report).

We found that people who were married were 33.7% more likely to say that growing older had been a positive experience than those who were single.

Limiting long-standing illness and lower occupational status were significantly associated with a more negative experience of ageing.

People whose age never, or at least not often, prevents them from doing the things they would like, were 69% more likely to say that ageing has been a positive experience than those who felt that their age limited them to some extent.

Importantly, a negative experience of ageing was also associated with pessimistic attitudes about ageing and what older age will bring:

- Those who were worried about their health getting worse as they get older were 32% more likely to have a negative experience of ageing than people who didn't worry.
- Those who expected to get lonely as they get older were 28% more likely to be to have a negative experience of ageing than those who didn't expect to get lonely.

## Discussion

This analysis of data from the latest wave of ELSA shows people having a generally positive view of their age and of ageing. However, this was not universal. People from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely than those in higher socioeconomic groups to hold downbeat views, including that age prevents them from doing the things they would like and that old age is a time of ill health and loneliness.

We also found that people who hold pessimistic views about later life, such as expecting to get lonely and expecting that their health will get worse in the future, are likely to report a more negative experience of growing older. While we can't establish the direction of cause and effect from this analysis, it is interesting to consider these findings in the context of a body of research on pessimism and health. For example, pessimism is a substantial risk factor for a number of adverse health outcomes, including death from coronary heart disease (Pänkäläinen M. et al. 2016). Meanwhile, good physical health is associated with an optimistic disposition independent of socioeconomic status (Steptoe et al., 2006).

So this does suggest that pessimistic older people might have a more negative experience of growing older because of adverse effects that arise from being pessimistic. In this way, a negative feedback loop is produced in which the worse people think things will be, the worse they are.

It's notable too that we find 40% of 60–69-year olds and 39% of 70–79-year-olds expecting to get lonelier as they get older. But recent data from the Office for National Statistics shows that 2.7% of 65–74-year-olds and 3% of the over-75s actually reported feeling lonely often or always in 2017–2018. This suggests that the narrative of the lonely older person has become

widely accepted even by older people themselves, an example perhaps of the effects of negative stereotyping and internalised ageism. It shows that it's important for people to have a more realistic view of what later life may bring in order to allay unfounded pessimism.

While it's certainly important to hold realistic expectations, we also know from previous work that pessimistic attitudes can be addressed with psychological and emotional support. In a pilot evaluation of seven courses ([Evaluation of transitions in later life pilot projects](#) funded under the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's [UK Branch] Transitions in Later Life programme) that aimed to build resilience and emotional wellbeing in people aged 50+, participants reported increased optimism, a new-found enthusiasm and a desire to make the most of their later lives. Clearly there is a place for such courses for people approaching later life and we have advocated that these should be incorporated into the mid-life MOT currently being developed by a number of organisations ([Developing the mid-life MOT](#)).

Ultimately though, it's essential that we help people to think about their health and how to keep active and socially connected as they grow older so that their worst expectations about poor health and loneliness don't become a reality. This is particularly important for people who are less well-off and at risk of missing out on a good later life.

## References

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Results of regression analysis, ELSA Wave 8, in which the dependent variable is response to the question: 'on the whole, has growing older been a positive or negative experience?' Negative attitude to ageing is used as the reference category for this variable.

	Independent variable	Odds ratio	Standard error
<b>Marital Status (Reference = Single)</b>			
	Married (first and only marriage)	1.337**	0.143
	Remarried (second or later marriage)	1.278*	0.171
	Separated, but still legally married	0.986	0.326
	Divorced	1.068	0.168
	Widowed	1.092	0.169
<b>Sex (Reference = Male)</b>			
	Female	0.901	0.072
<b>Longstanding health issue (Reference = No longstanding illness)</b>			
	Has a limiting longstanding illness	0.594***	0.079
	Has a non-limiting longstanding illness	0.973	0.090
<b>NS-SEC 8 Category Classification (Reference = Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations)</b>			
	Lower managerial, administrative & professional occupations	0.866	0.137
	Intermediate occupation	0.846	0.155
	Small employers & own account workers	0.997	0.157
	Lower supervisory & technical occupations	0.766*	0.159
	Semi-routine occupations	0.698***	0.145
	Routine occupations	0.712**	0.157
	Never worked and long-term unemployed	0.900	0.519
<b>Age prevents them from doing the things they would like (Reference = sometimes or often)</b>			
	Never or not often	1.452***	0.071
<b>Expects to get more lonely as gets older (Reference = neutral or disagree)</b>			
	Agree or strongly agree	0.770***	0.068
<b>Worries that health will get worse as they get older (Reference = neutral or disagree)</b>			
	Agree or strongly agree	0.722***	0.077
<b>Whether growing old bothers the respondent (Reference = agree or strongly agree)</b>			
	Neutral or disagree	3.448***	0.067
<b>Constant</b>		1.360	0.228

Notes: Coefficients are expected as odds ratios, which indicate the likelihood that the respondent is positive about ageing (i.e. did not respond with the reference category for the dependent variable), with all else held equal. If an odds ratio is greater than 1, this indicates that respondents were more likely to be positive about ageing than those who answered with the reference category for the same variable. Thus, people who are married (in their first and only marriage) are 33.7% more likely to reply that growing older has been a positive experience than people who are single. People in routine occupations are 28.8% less likely (100-71.2) than those in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations. People who say that ageing never or not often prevents them from doing the things they would like are 45.2% more likely to be positive about ageing than people who say that age sometimes or often prevents them from doing the things they would like.

R<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke): 0.185

N: 5662

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



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The Centre for Ageing Better received £50 million from the Big Lottery Fund in January 2015 in the form of an endowment to enable it to identify what works in the ageing sector by bridging the gap between research, evidence and practice.