

Myths about Aging

These true and false statements are designed to increase your understanding of the physical, mental and social facts about aging.

1. As people age they become less like each other.

True. Variability increases with age. Older people have had longer to develop their individual differences. The variety of experiences that make up a lifetime causes them to be different.

2. Depression is the most common emotional problem of the elderly.

True. Health professionals refer to depression as the common cold of the elderly. It affects between 20-25% of older people. Some estimate that up to 50% of elderly persons suffer symptoms of depression, such as sadness, sleep and appetite disturbances, slowed motor and verbal responses, memory problems, poor self-esteem, physical ailments and fatigue.

3. All five senses tend to decline with aging.

True. Sight, hearing and touch experience more marked changes, but evidence exists that taste and smell also decline. Nerve cells are lost during the process of aging. The decline in vision and hearing may cause an older person to become socially isolated. The decline in taste and smell may explain why older persons often derive less enjoyment from eating. They may also tend to add more salt and sugar to their food at a time when excesses of these ingredients may be injurious to their health.

4. The majority of older workers cannot work as effectively as younger workers.

False. Despite declines in perception and reaction speed, studies of older workers under actual working conditions generally show that they perform as well as, if not better than, younger workers. Consistency of output tends to increase with age, as older workers perform at steadier rates from week to week than younger workers do. In addition, they have less job turnover, fewer accidents, and less absenteeism than younger workers.

5. On average, the elderly sustain a greater number of losses than other age groups.

True. These include loss of spouse and close friends, the family home, status in the community, reduction in income, physical vigor, beauty by society's standards, and loss of a job together with all the work-related activities and acquaintances.

6. *While retirement is often associated with strains in the marital relationship, older couples generally express high levels of satisfaction with their marriage.*

True. The literature, however, is mixed. Marriages which have been good often get better with retirement. Couples who were able to ignore problems when one or both were working may find that increased contact brings intolerable tensions to the marriage. Divorce is on the increase among post-retired couples. For those who marry last in life, the most critical factor in the success of the marriage is the attitude of their adult children.

7. *Reaction time and the ability to learn new things are unaffected by the aging process.*

False. Reaction time increases with age. It takes longer for older people to process information and to learn new materials or tasks. The more choices that are involved in the task, the longer it takes for them to react. It is suggested that this may be due to cautiousness, since there is a tendency on the part of the older people toward accuracy and certainty. Exercise, increased motivation and practice can reduce the effects of longer reaction time.

8. *About 75% of older people are healthy enough to carry out their normal activities.*

True. About 9% of those over 65 are institutionalized and approximately another 15% amount the non-institutionalized say they are unable to engage in their major activities of daily living.

9. *Older people are isolated and lonely.*

False. The majority of older people are not socially isolated. There is a connection between being sick and feeling lonely. But for elderly people who are well, studies show that between contact with family and friends and participation in church and other voluntary organizations, older people have frequent social contact.