

A LINE ON LIFE

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*"Will you still love me when I'm old and gray?" **

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Have you ever imagined what your love life might be like when you are older? When you are 65 or more years of age, how will you feel about the way you look? Will you be in a relationship? Will you be sexual?

Many people do not view the elderly as sexual. They view elderly people as wrinkled, weak, listless, in poor health, and often without a partner. Even some physicians and other health professionals have developed restrictive attitudes about the sexuality of elderly people. (Some younger readers will find it difficult to imagine their parents as sexual beings, not just their grandparents.) For better understanding, here are a few facts.

People remain sexual throughout their lives. Sexual activities decline over the decades. Some older people may even choose sexual abstinence as a lifestyle. However, we need to be aware that sexual feelings are normal throughout our lifespan. If we realize this, we are less likely to feel guilty and apologetic about our sexuality. This guilt is evident in the familiar label of "*dirty old man*." The label endorses two negative views about sexuality. First, it assumes that sexual thoughts are "*dirty*" or shameful. Second, it incorrectly suggests that older people will not — or should not — have sexual feelings. The same label is not applied to women, because our culture has long denied that women have sexual feelings. (Whether or not we want them, the sexual feelings will occur.)

Many older people need a good sexual relationship. As we age, we may lose our health and our partner, along with friends, our career, and possibly our children. These losses can lead to severe depression and loneliness. An effective remedy for this is to develop a loving, intimate, sensual relationship.



Sexual physiology changes with age. If we are aware of these changes, we can accept them more easily. However, sexual interaction can be pleasurable for both partners without intercourse. With the whole response cycle slowed down, more satisfaction can be obtained by kissing, petting and cuddling.

Many women are glad when their menopause occurs. It signals an end to menstruation and pregnancy. However, others are disturbed by it. Some incorrectly see it as signaling their end as sexual beings.

Changes in body image can influence our sexuality. When young, many of us are dissatisfied with our body image. If we add the wrinkles and other factors of aging, this aversion increases. In addition, our culture values youth over wisdom. In contrast to men, women are more likely to be evaluated by their physical beauty. It takes a great deal of effort to counteract this cultural conditioning to think of ourselves

as attractive people. Some cannot accept their aging bodies. They find only temporary relief in plastic surgery or various medications.

Use it or lose it. With almost any activity, if you don't keep practicing it, you become less capable. This is particularly true with sexual activity and the elderly. Continued sexual activity helps to maintain natural functioning and preserve muscle tone over the years.

Older people are better lovers. If people learn from their experiences well, it can bring them an awareness and acceptance of themselves. Hopefully, it can also make them more sensitive to others. Many older adults have more leisure time and live a slower-paced lifestyle. More attention can be devoted to relationships, so they can be nurtured and enjoyed. It takes most of us a long time to develop a more-accepting attitude toward ourselves, others, and life as a whole. This acceptance makes us better partners.

If we can accept ourselves as sexual beings, we can enjoy our sexuality throughout our lives.

The greatest determinant of an aging person's sexual activity is **physical health**. (Having an available partner helps too.) Although aging brings an increase in health problems, disability and disease can occur at any age. Most disabled younger people find satisfactory ways of modifying their sexual activities. If the elderly can still accept themselves as sexual — even with the disabilities of aging — they can find satisfying ways to engage in sensual activities.

* Adapted from Bryan Strong, Christine DeVault and Barbara Werner Sayad, *Core Concepts in Human Sexuality*, Mayfield Publishing, 1996, pages 180-181.