

OPINION

# The conversation we really need about aging doesn't involve U.S. presidential candidates



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Thanks to the U.S. presidential election campaign, we seem intensely preoccupied by the age and cognitive state of two privileged old men.

Joe Biden, 81, has stepped aside, felled by the perception that he is too old and frail, while his rival Donald Trump, 78, forges on narcissistically.

But when are we going to move beyond musing about the U.S. gerontocracy and have the more important conversation about the challenges of aging in an aging society?

What does it mean to be old? Who decides if we are competent enough to do a job, or live independently? What accommodations do aging workers and citizens need?

And how do we overcome the stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination that flow from rampant ageism in an ageist society?

The discussion needs to begin with recognizing what aging is – and isn't.

The WHO has as a good [definition](#) as any: “At the biological level, ageing results from the impact of the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage over time. This leads to a gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity, a growing risk of disease and ultimately death.”

It goes on to note, importantly, that these changes differ greatly between individuals, that they “are neither linear nor consistent, and they are only loosely associated with a person's age in years.”

In other words, age is just a number. There are old sexagenarians and young centenarians.

Of course, everyone will decline at some point, physically and mentally. We will all experience changes in voice, movement, memory, and hair colour. Walking a little slower or being a little more forgetful doesn't make someone decrepit or doddering.

Many gradual losses in physical and mental ability can be offset by experience and wisdom, or even changing expectations. Merciless, prejudiced, amateurish diagnosis, as has been done with Mr. Biden, serves no one.

As Tracey Gendron, a gerontologist and author of *Ageism Unmasked*, writes: "Age in and of itself does not tell you what somebody's experiences are, what somebody's values are, what somebody's health status is, what somebody's cognitive status is."

If we are judging someone's competency to do a job – whether it's U.S. president, bus driver, or newspaper columnist – we need objective assessment tools and standards, not just fear-based assumptions.

What matters is fitness, not age.

Eventually, it will be someone's [time to go](#). Figuring how to do this fairly becomes more important as workers remain in their jobs well past the traditional retirement age of 65 out of financial necessity, love for the job, or because of the shortage of workers.

Labour practices and pension plans will need to adapt, allowing aging workers to ease out of their jobs gradually rather than retire abruptly.

Of course, work is only part of the equation. Beyond biological changes, aging is often associated with other life transitions such as retirement, relocation to more appropriate housing, and the death of friends and partners.

Retirement is a challenge for many, especially if they are defined by their work. Struggles with money and loneliness can often be worse than the physical and mental challenges of aging.

One of the worst parts of aging is experiencing social death long before actual death.

Often, in the discussions about getting old, we are our own worst enemies. We too often deal with ageism by doubling down on claims of youthfulness, by

trying to become super-agers. Conversely, in a society that fears and demeans aging, we can come to believe the stereotypes. If you're constantly told that your memory is declining or that you're too old to walk to the store, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Little adaptations, like making cities age-friendly, can make a big difference to keeping people in the community as they age.

At the same time, we can't forget those who need advanced care as they age. Warehousing the frail elderly in understaffed institutions where they are stripped of their dignity is not a solution. Neither is driving their loved ones to the point of exhaustion and/or financial ruin.

Tackling these society-wide challenges is far more important than debating how old is too old to be president.

We need to normalize, not fear, growing older; recognize the changes that will come, and how we can prepare for them without perpetuating harmful tropes.

All this to say: There are some serious conversations to be had about aging that extend far beyond the mental acuity of two old politicians.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-conversation-we-really-need-about-aging-doesnt-involve-us/>

I didn't know what prejudice was till I got enough white in my hair to be considered "old." Thereafter, I regularly came to realize I was being written off immediately for that reason. People, I am told, think me, by appearance and fitness, a decade younger than I am, but this still is not enough to save me.

Partly I think, too, it is the fear that young people in positions of leadership or aspiration have, worried that "the old guy" will see their weaknesses and the reasons for their insecurities, highlighting them by contrast, and leave them looking bad (even if this only materializes in their own imaginations). They hire, congregate with, and include their own kind, in a pack mentality wherein threats are neutralized and shared traits are validated. Old people also typically are slower to buy into the latest fads and enthusiasms; sales efforts, whether retail or the manager staking his or her cred on a mandatory "team-building" exercise, come with the expectation that employees will buy in completely and not make the initiative (and its proponents) look bad.

For all the genuine "progress" that has been made, life in this world will never get essentially and qualitatively better because each cohort claiming its window of power and prominence will insist on implementing its twisted view of the world, i.e., inflicting its particular arrogant ignorance like all before. TJB