

The new longevity – what’s changing?

As we get older we’re typically likely to live longer and better than previous generations.

But the headlines suggest things are getting worse. Financial challenges (not enough money), out of work (nobody wants us anymore), age discrimination (those old people just aren’t up to speed), aged care (it’s like a gaol in there), Alzheimer’s (we’re all losing our marbles).

It’s hard to keep a balanced view on all this.

We are healthier than ever

At age 65, our potential period of independence is increasing and is currently about 80% of our typical longevity (the rest of our life). Also, the longer we live our period of dependency is likely to be shorter.

We know more than ever about managing ourselves to live better as we age. Mind you, it doesn’t just happen. We need to apply what is now known to maintain our wellbeing.

Working longer

The Reserve Bank of Australia reports that over 60’s have been staying in the workforce longer than ever, reflecting better health, flexible work practices and availability of less demanding service sector jobs.

There are also reasons like paying off mortgages (ours and the kids), building super for increasing longevity and tighter Age Pension conditions but with planning we tend to be in better shape to deal with these.

It’s not all roses

There are other challenges too.

Men are more prone to social isolation, inhibiting wellbeing and outward focus.

Women tend to outlive men but with a longer period of dependency accompanied by more cognitive and other health issues.

Changing research focus

Reflecting this, longevity research is shifting to ‘how well’ rather than ‘how long’. It’s clear that a focus on wellness flows into longer and better lives and that just seeking to prolong lifespans is likely to be more difficult and costly.

Making informed choices about exercise, social behaviour, cognitive maintenance and diet should underpin our approach. There’s plenty of good information around, so we need to be better at acting on it.

Positive attitude

A positive attitude to ageing is known to be a key element. If we let them, the headlines can frame expectations that things are too difficult, and foster helplessness.

Successful ageing relies on taking more control, not surrendering it.

Making realistic personal plans and acting on them is a high priority. Such plans provide a framework to live in and enable us to respond better as things change.

Personal plans also help us to talk more productively about our future with friends, family and professional advisers.

Change can be a threat or an opportunity. Our attitude - and our plans - define whether we grow or stagnate.