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The New Old Age



by [Alice Park](#)

SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

Life once followed a familiar pattern. You’d go to school, get a job, build a family, and then, sometime in your 60s, retire, enjoying life for a few years until you grew too frail to live on your own. Then you might move in with family or check into a facility where you’d spend your “golden years.”

A crucial part of that blueprint was an unsaid but universal assumption: that for the vast majority of people, life would not extend far beyond their 70s. That was based on the average lifespan when this still dominant picture of an American life arc was first formed, and it underpinned everything—from how people planned their careers to the way

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The Age of Longevity

~~60 million Americans are now 60 or older, which is roughly equal to the combined~~
populations of Spain and Portugal. A similar trend is playing out globally, with an estimated 2.1 billion people—or 1 in 5—projected to be 60 or older by 2050. Already, a third of all people in Japan are in that older age range; 60 more countries are expected to hit that ratio in the next 25 years.

More than a century's worth of scientific and social progress means that most of us are now more productive and more useful to society for far longer than in the past.

JAN. 26, 2026

THE LONGEVITY ISSUE

What to expect when you're expecting to live longer *by Alice Park*



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“What we have is a fundamental change in the age structure of society,” says John Rowe, professor of health policy and aging at [Columbia University's Aging Center](#), referring to the way we're aging—and also the way we're creating young people, with birth rates plummeting in most countries. Globally, [fertility levels](#) have dropped below the so-called population replacement rate of just over two births per woman.

It is a sea change—and one that raises big questions about how we both individually and collectively navigate what, in a sense, is [our new old age](#). How, for example, should we spend our extra time? Should employment still be confined to a finite number of years, or instead ebb and flow throughout an entire lifetime? And where, in a world of acute [housing shortages](#), will everyone live?

“We have to re-engineer our society, because the fundamental institutions of our society—education and work and retirement—are not designed to support a population with the age distribution we are going to have,” says Rowe, who chaired the [MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Aging](#). “We need a fundamental redesign.”

Rowe is one of a growing global cohort of experts trying to work out precisely how this “re-engineering” might unfold. And they are starting by reframing seniors not as a burden, but as untapped sources of talent, experience, and social glue. It also means thinking more creatively and flexibly about life's three-piece jigsaw, so that it no longer has to follow the familiar trajectory of learning, work, and retirement. Instead, learning and work are sprinkled throughout a lifetime, rather than confined, respectively, to the beginning and middle; periods of leisure, meanwhile, no longer need to be relegated to the end.

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“The three-stage life is over,” says Martha Deevy, associate director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. And the quickest way to restructure it, she argues, is to stretch out education.

Learning, the new thinking goes, should take place continuously throughout life—not just during childhood and young adulthood. But doing so requires more than welcoming the odd 80- or 90-year-old to audit a college course. To truly redesign education, seniors must become an integral part of a university’s social and academic ecosystem.

One such effort is currently unfolding at Arizona State University, home to the first university-based retirement community in the U.S., where seniors live on campus in a 20-story building that’s a blend of a senior living facility and a dorm.

The facility, called Mirabella, has independent-living, assisted-living, and skilled-nursing options, like in most retirement communities. But residents are an active part of the university community, taking classes, mentoring students, and serving as teaching assistants. Everyone benefits—professors give lectures at the residence, and several doctoral music students live in the building rent-free, teaching seniors and gaining performance experience by giving concerts several times a week. “We get to practice our craft and receive feedback in real time,” says Caleb Bailey, a doctoral student in guitar performance who is one of four artists in residence at Mirabella.

Bailey and his classmates also benefited from having Mirabella residents in their classes. Two retired nurses took a musicology course on the history of arts and health with Bailey, for example. “They were able to provide a wealth of information that even the professor was not able to add,” he says.

Dr. Richard Kramer, a retired professor of gastroenterology at Stanford University, moved to Mirabella with his wife in 2021 and was inspired to create a mentorship program for premed students. He and other retired doctors in the building meet regularly with students to answer their questions about topics that might not be covered in the traditional premed curriculum, like how to achieve work-life balance, avoid burnout, and navigate the bio-ethics challenges they may face as providers. “I’ve always felt that the best job I could ever have is one that I wanted to do but wasn’t necessarily paid to do,” says Kramer. “That’s what this is to me. It’s probably the most gratifying and satisfying thing I’ve ever done.”

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Students get just as much out of it. “Every single time I leave my apartment, I am greeted by 300-plus people who are happy to see me, engage in conversation, and who have lived a fruitful life and have years—decades—of wisdom and stories to share,” says Bailey. Recent studies show that loneliness and isolation are hitting older and younger populations the hardest, and university faculty aren’t necessarily equipped or expected to manage the social and emotional education of their students. The senior citizens on campus are helping provide that support, says Lindsey Beagley, senior director of Lifelong University Engagement at Arizona State University Enterprise Partners. “Universities were the engines behind innovations in medicine and public health, so college campuses should be particularly well positioned to think about how to connect generations more meaningfully,” she says.

About 100 senior facilities are located on campuses in 30 states, from the University of Florida to Stanford. The challenge now is to entice more universities to follow Mirabella’s more comprehensive model. Already, the positive feedback from seniors and students is drawing attention from real estate developers, who have also been responding to the growing demand for noninstitutional, non-traditional senior living options. One developer, Varcity, plans to open a facility near Texas A&M that will give seniors access to classes, sporting events, and facilities. Varcity is planning a similar community at Purdue.

The current practice of retiring after a certain age mostly comes from industries rooted in manual labor and the limits of keeping older employees in physically demanding jobs. But even though the nature of work and the makeup of the labor force have shifted drastically, most companies still think that when workers approach so-called retirement age, it's time to go.

But labor and social-science experts say that if companies want to be competitive, they should start focusing on retaining their older employees, not showing them the door.

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In Japan, older people outnumber younger ones, and companies have struggled to figure out what to do once seniors reach retirement age and how to entice younger employees to join and remain loyal. Some companies have found a clever solution. Rather than cutting off retirees, corporate giants like Hitachi and Mitsubishi, among others, allow them to continue coming into the office for light work or simply to read the newspaper or socialize with other workers. Called the madogiwa-zoku—meaning “window tribe,” because they often sit by the office windows—these workers are proof to the whole company that management acknowledges the service employees have devoted throughout their career. The company also retains the experience these seniors have amassed, which they can pass on to younger employees. It might seem like a waste of salaries, but the idea is that investing in older workers will pay off if younger workers feel they will be offered the same treatment at retirement age.

A person's career doesn't have to follow a straight line, either. Today's jobs can be performed for far longer, rendering the traditional model of working full time for decades, then retiring, obsolete, says David Rehkopf, co-director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. He and other experts believe workers should flow in and out of the workforce, spending some years working full time and some years with flexible hours to allow them to raise children, care for aging parents, or pursue other interests. “You no longer need to work 50 to 60 hours [a week] to benefit the company,” says Rehkopf. “You could work 20 hours if you want.”

Some companies are helping older workers transition into different types of work better suited to their later career needs and skills, such as tasks that rely on deep networks of contacts or more mature decision-making abilities. It's a model that the government in

Singapore is promoting by providing grants and payments to companies that employ older workers and encouraging seniors to pick up new skills and jobs.

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However, incentives like these are still relatively rare; research shows that older workers are not offered enough skill-building opportunities or schedule flexibility. Four in 10 companies globally still enforce a mandatory retirement age, according to AARP, and 53% of executives do not include age in their diversity policies.

“There is a ton of conversation around what we might need to do to reskill America and up-skill people. But thinking about that in life-course terms almost never happens,” says Stevens. “This is the frontier.”

Dr. Linda Fried noticed this problem in the 1990s. Many of the patients in her geriatric practice viewed retirement as inevitable, even though they didn’t want to stop working. So Fried, director of the Columbia Aging Center, launched the Experience Corps: an employment version of the Peace Corps that matches retired seniors with local school systems. Fried saw early education as a good fit for seniors—young people need support to build the foundations of learning and self-esteem, retirees need an outlet for their valuable experience and maturity, and teachers could always use some extra help. “It was designed to be a win-win-win,” says Fried. “And it works.” AARP now runs the program in 16 cities.

But while the progress is encouraging, Fried says it’s not enough. “I designed it over 30 years ago, and it’s still only in 16 cities,” she says. “This should not be the only program, but one of an array of programs where any older adult who wants to volunteer to make a difference. All of these years later, there is resistance and a lack of ability to fund this because it requires a public commitment of resources.”

Figuring out where everybody will live is a critical issue, and not just a logistical one. Prioritizing what seniors need—from accessible public transportation to housing options beyond senior-living facilities, for example—can keep older people healthier and involved in their communities for longer. Research has found that seniors who live in institutional settings, removed from the community, feel isolated and tend to become more lonely and depressed from their loss of independence and self-esteem, which in turn leads to poor health and higher medical costs.

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Multigenerational housing arrangements are one model for building a society that is more welcoming, rather than dismissive, of older people. They have become popular in Germany, a so-called super-aged society where older populations are quickly outnumbering younger ones; the government and local communities have invested in several such facilities across the country.

In New York, an affordable housing high-rise in Queens represents a similar approach. Built in 2019 on what was once a parking lot, One Flushing includes more than 200 apartments earmarked for residents of various ages, plus perks like a rooftop garden where they can tend and harvest tomatoes, lettuce, habanero peppers, and fresh herbs. On a blistering July afternoon, Mariah Veras, 56, donned a hat and watered the dozens of rectangular growing beds with fellow members of the Garden Club. Veras had never gardened before living there; now, she shows off strings of drying garlic hanging under the building's solar panels.

"I personally think they should make more places like One Flushing all over New York City to help the elderly," she says. "When I get older, I don't want to feel older. I want to still feel vibrant like I am now, and living here is helping my purpose." At One Flushing, younger residents teach older ones how to use computers and practice conversing in English. And useful businesses have opened up on the block, including an urgent-care center and a tearoom that gets packed on weekdays with older residents catching up over hot drinks. "I like to stay here instead of a senior assisted-living place," says Irene Ng, a 75-year-old resident who spoke through an interpreter; she is learning English from younger people in the building. "With different generations in the building, it gives me more energy."

As the older population continues to expand, the need to adopt more of these strategies will only grow more urgent. After all, disparities in the most obvious factor in longevity—health—are already separating those who are able to age well from those who can't.

In the U.S., Rowe says the lower portion of the middle class will face the biggest hurdles in older age, as they are set to enter old age with a lower level of physical fitness than their parents' generation boasted, he says. "It's 25% to 30% of the population that we are leaving behind."

Making sure that longer life—and an enjoyably longer life, at that—is a possibility for all will require more deliberate intervention from policymakers—as well as a continued push to

think about the life course not in terms of chronological age, but as a continuum. And it requires a shift away from the ageist attitudes that have led to segregation and discrimination of older people. “We know what to do in many, many ways,” says Irving. “The frustration is that we don’t do it quickly enough and effectively enough. And that goes to the bigger question of our values and priorities, which have brought us to where we are today—but which can change to bring us to a different future.”

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Illustration by Joan Wong for Time

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Ovaries Could Unlock Secrets of Longevity



by **Dominique Mosbergen**

HEALTH CORRESPONDENT

Deena Emera was mesmerized by the images on the screen. “They were beautiful,” she says of the slides she saw in December—each a microscopic closeup of a bowhead whale’s ovary. The images were marvelously crisp and showed the mottled outer layer of the organs.

Bowhead whales are considered the longest-living mammals on earth. They can live for more than 200 years, and females can reproduce well after their 100th birthdays. Emera, an evolutionary biologist, has long wondered: “What is different about their ovaries that allows

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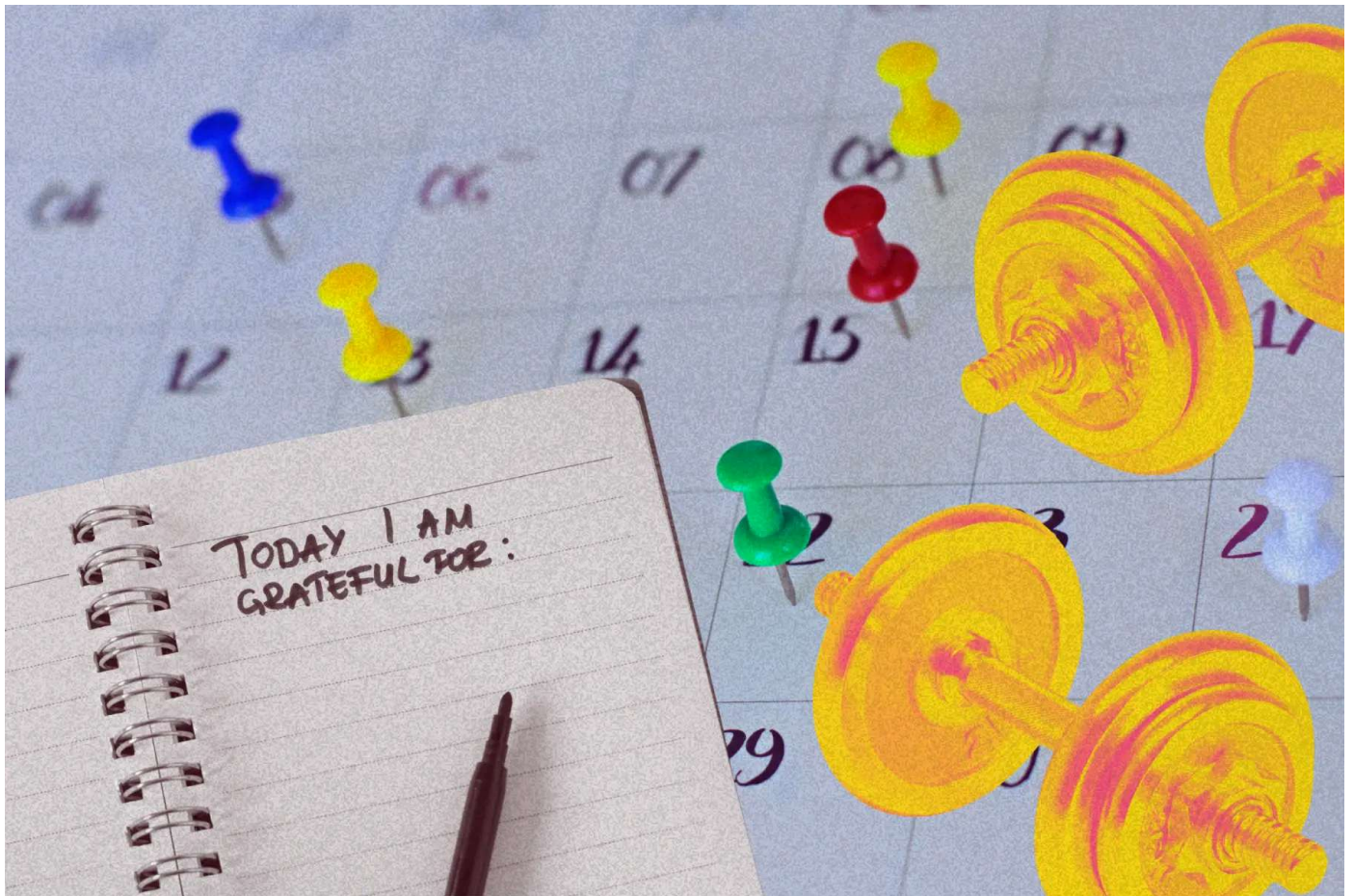


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9 Resolutions That Can Help You Age Better This Year



by **Angela Haupt**

HAUPT IS A HEALTH AND WELLNESS EDITOR AT TIME.

If you're aging—and every single one of us is—adopting even small new habits can have a profound impact on your current and future well-being. That's true whether you're 25 or 75.

“Thinking about your trajectory of aging and how you can influence it, starting as early as possible, can make a difference in your year ahead regardless of your age,” says Nathan

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