

AGESENSE

adapting to life's changes

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What Is AgeSense?

Groucho Marx once remarked, “Age is not a particularly interesting subject. Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.” But is growing older really just about marking time? AgeSense is used to refer to the willingness to examine personal beliefs about aging, explore the dual ideas of loss and opportunity, and discover a balanced perspective of what it means “to age.”

Some Ways to Think about Aging

There are many ways to think about aging. For example, aging can be placed within a chronological framework, such as how many birthdays an individual has celebrated. Aging can be thought about in terms of functioning, which is concerned with what a person can accomplish or do rather than with the number of birthdays that an individual has experienced.¹ Another perspective places importance on what people think of as appropriate tasks or activities at different ages and acknowledges that the culture influences how people think about aging.² People also can think about age subjectively — that is, in terms of how old someone feels as opposed to how many birthdays a person has celebrated.³

Aging in Your Communities

American society uses a generally accepted, chronologically based definition of 65 years of age or older to determine when someone is considered “old.” But American society, and aging, has changed in the past 100 years. For example, life expectancy is the



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number of years, on average, that people can expect to live, given that they are born in a specific year. In 1900, life expectancy at birth was 47 years of age. In 1950, that number had risen to 68 years of age.⁴ And in 2020, the average life expectancy projection at birth is about 80 years of age — 77 for men and almost 82 for women.⁵ James Vaupel, an expert in the field, talks about how life expectancy has increased by about 6 hours a day in the last two centuries.⁶

There are also other societal changes. In 1900, only about 4 percent of individuals in the United States were 65 years of age or older. In 2010, those 65 and older constituted about 13 percent of the total population.⁷ In 2025, that number is expected to rise to almost 18 percent, and in 2050, it is expected to rise to approximately 20 percent of the total American population.⁸

The population of Kansas mirrors national population numbers. In 2010, a little more than 13 percent of the entire population in Kansas was age 65 or older⁹ and by 2030, 20.2 percent of Kansans will be age 65 or older.¹⁰

In the past, when life expectancy was so much less than it is today, people didn't have much of a chance to die from Alzheimer's disease or stroke. These diseases are prominent today because societal and medical advances have been successful at preserving life into those older age ranges. In earlier times, men, women, and children might die from a variety of acute illnesses.¹¹ People didn't live long enough, for the most part, to acquire long-term chronic diseases. Another contributing factor is that women started having fewer children, which affected the number of younger people present in society. All of these changes are relatively new within the context of all of human history.

Society is just in the beginning stages of thinking about and understanding old age in modern terms. This rapid aging of the population has helped create attitudes and stereotypes about older adults and what it means to grow older.¹²

Stereotypes

Ideas about aging help formulate the attitudes people have about growing older. Attitudes can be both negative and positive, and within the realm of aging, both of these stereotypes exist.



One group of researchers suggests that negative attitudes and behaviors directed at older adults are caused by fears related to aging and death.¹³ In this view, aging is seen as a process of becoming less of a person. Wrinkles, gray hair, liver spots, forgetting names, losing driving privileges, using a wheelchair, and a “bad” death may be used as examples of what it means to age. This negative view of aging is centered on the idea of loss.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

Another view may be categorized as “anti-aging,” with a goal of retaining youth.¹⁶ Although an acknowledgment is given that chronological years are advancing, aging is seen as preventable, and old age as a fight that can be won. This view may include denial and a refusal to think about the possibility of disease, frailty, dependence, and the certainty of death.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Rather than becoming less of a person, individuals have the opportunity to, as Oprah Winfrey put it, “age brilliantly.”¹⁹

Ageism refers to an irrational prejudice similar to racism or sexism.²⁰ Beliefs can center on negative views of aging, or they can fall into excessive positivism. The United States currently tends to lean toward mostly negative attitudes and stereotypes,²¹ and younger adults tend to have a more negative attitude about their own aging than do older adults.^{14;22} Numerous beliefs Americans hold about aging are actually false.²³ For example, older adults report better well-being than younger adults, with a possible peak during the seventh decade of life.²⁴⁻²⁵ Additionally, people seem to gain in wisdom as they age.²⁶ There both losses and gains to aging.

Why Change Attitudes about Aging?

American society is aging, and many individuals have negative attitudes and hold false beliefs about growing older. People who think positively about their own aging actually do more for their own health.²⁷ They also tend to report they are more functional,²⁸ more likely to recover from disability,²⁹ and more likely to live longer.³⁰ Additionally, researchers have suggested that changing the way American society views aging may help reduce and prevent declines in function and consequences associated with those declines.³¹

Education can reduce ageism, as those who have more knowledge about the aging process hold less negative attitudes about aging.^{23; 32} By ensuring that beliefs about aging are accurate, individuals and society may benefit. Beliefs influence how people act toward each other and what programs and services they choose to support.³³⁻³⁴

Model of Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC)

One way to think about aging is as another stage in life's journey. People experience losses and gains throughout their lifetimes, not just during old age. This concept and other important points related to aging are illustrated in the Model of Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC).³⁵⁻³⁶

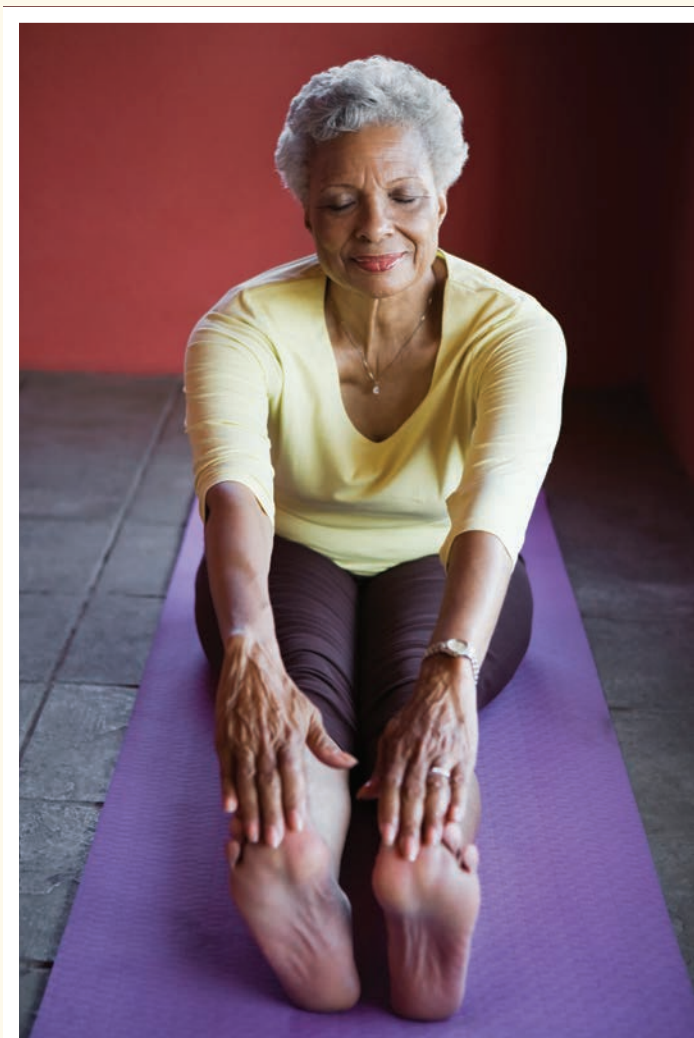
Selection refers to choosing activities and goals, a process that happens throughout people's lives. People select certain goals as children, young adults, middle-aged adults, and as they grow older. When they choose one goal over another, they are missing out on other opportunities.

Optimization means simply that there are certain behaviors needed to achieve those goals in order to be successful. Optimization refers to the means that people use to achieve the selected goal.

Compensation is used when the means or behaviors that a person was using to achieve a goal are no longer available. There has been a loss in some way, and a new strategy is needed to keep that goal alive.^{35; 37-38}

SOC implies that success includes maximizing positive outcomes, minimizing challenges, and using the three functions of S, O, and C. This is true for children, adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults. **What** are selected as goals, **how** resources are optimized, and **when** compensatory strategies are used are different across the lifespan. The distribution may change, and what is actually defined as a "gain" (desirable outcomes) or a "loss" (avoidance of undesirable outcomes) might be different. The model acknowledges that there are biological changes inherent within the aging process, but that the aging process differs across individuals because of genetics and lifestyle.³⁵

SOC also suggests that culture has an important role to play in the aging process. For example, the development of hearing aids has helped people with hearing deficits function better in society and remain independent. This is an example of how culture, in terms of a technological invention, can intervene to help people with a biological loss. If an individual chooses to use a hearing aid, then he or she is using the technique of compensation.³⁶



A classic example used to explain SOC may be found within the story of pianist Arthur Rubinstein. At age 80, when asked how he could still be so proficient in his piano playing, he said that he carefully chose just a few pieces (selection). He practiced these fewer pieces more often (optimization). And, because he couldn't play the faster parts as fast as he used to, he slowed down even more in the slower parts, which made the fast parts seem faster (compensation).

SOC gives people a way to respond to everyday demands in an adaptive manner, taking into account biology and culture.³⁵ With SOC, it is all about balancing gains and losses. Individuals can achieve a balance through thinking about the goals selected, the behaviors they chose to engage in, and the strategies used to compensate when needed. By using SOC, people can adapt.

Using SOC to Change Your Thinking about Aging

SOC suggests that people use selection, optimization, and compensation throughout their lives, even though they don't always realize this is what they are doing.³⁶ Setting goals, figuring out how to achieve the desired outcome, and finding another way when presented with some obstacle may be viewed by others as adaptive when this takes place in earlier life stages. But in the face of societal and personal stereotypes about aging, many people lose sight of this fact.^{35-36; 38} The SOC model suggests that people who are aging may continue to use the three functions of selection, optimization, and compensation to choose important goals, figure out how to get to that goal, and change tactics along the way if needed.³⁷

Summary

Apart from the number of birthdays a person has experienced, there are many ways to think about the process of growing older. American society tends to use a chronologically based definition of 65 years of age to determine what constitutes an "older adult," although people are beginning to think about what it means to



age in the 21st century. Currently, attitudes about aging fall on a continuum of negative to positive, although most Americans tend to hold generally negative beliefs and stereotypes. By examining personal attitudes and learning more about aging, people may decide that although aging is inevitable, a negative attitude about the process is not. People who think more positively about their own aging may reap many benefits, such as the possibility of living longer.

The Model of Selective Optimization with Compensation offers a way to think about growing older as another stage of life with both losses and gains and to discover ways to adapt to the aging process. Individuals can achieve a balanced view of aging through thinking about the goals they select, the behaviors they engage in, and the strategies they use to compensate when needed. Within this model, living life as an older adult can be viewed as a familiar adaptive process of balancing losses and gains.

***Note:** For a list of references cited in this document, please visit www.aging.ksu.edu/p.aspx?tabid=203.

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