

Overcoming Ageism

A Talk and Discussion Given at 1st UU of San Diego
on September 17, 2022 by
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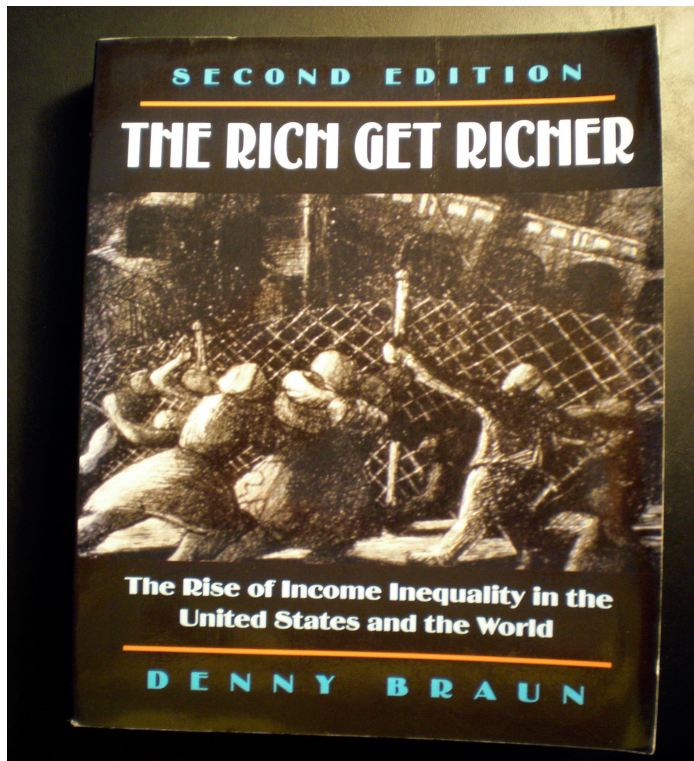
(For a PDF copy of this presentation, email denny.braun@usfamily.net)

Before We Begin

- Let's take a moment to do a quick survey
- Jot down the 1st word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of an older person
- You will get a chance to discuss your results during your breakout room session. Thank you!

A Little About Me

- I was a professor of Sociology for a third of a century (1968-2002)
- Main area of expertise: Inequality and social justice
- My social stratification class involved the Big 3: class, gender, race
- My social class research focused on income inequality = 2 editions of my book



What my class never covered regarding inequality was AGEISM! Perhaps I may be forgiven. I was 24 when I first started teaching in 1968 and my students were barely younger—it simply was not on our radar. !”Our mantra was “never trust anyone over 30!” Fast forwarding to the present shows that our country is now full of rapidly ageing Baby Boomers. With the passage of time, age prejudice and discrimination have become a greater issue. Today we will look more closely at it.

What Exactly is Ageism?

- The term was coined in 1969 by [Robert Neil Butler](#) to describe discrimination against [seniors](#)
- It is stereotyping and/or discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age (either casual or systemic)
- Even the elderly can adopt ageist negative self images because they have been brainwashed by a lifetime of negative stereotypes
- Younger people's [Fear](#) of death, disability, and dependence can be major causes of ageism
- [Coping mechanisms](#) such as avoiding, segregating, and rejecting older people allow people to avoid thinking about their own mortality.

The SIZE of Age Cohorts has caused more focus on Ageism!

67.2 million as of 2019



72.1 million as of 2019



65.2 million as of 2019



71.6 million as of 2019



Boomers were the LARGEST age cohort for ½ a century!

47.0 million as of 2019



The generations defined

Generation Z

Born after: 1996*

Millennials

Born: 1981 to 1996
Age in 2018: 22 to 37

Generation X

Born: 1965 to 1980
Age in 2018: 38 to 53

Baby Boomers

Born: 1946 to 1964
Age in 2018: 54 to 72

Silent Generation

Born: 1928 to 1945
Age in 2018: 73 to 90

Born 1997-2012

1997
1996

1981
1980

1965
1964

1946
1945

1928

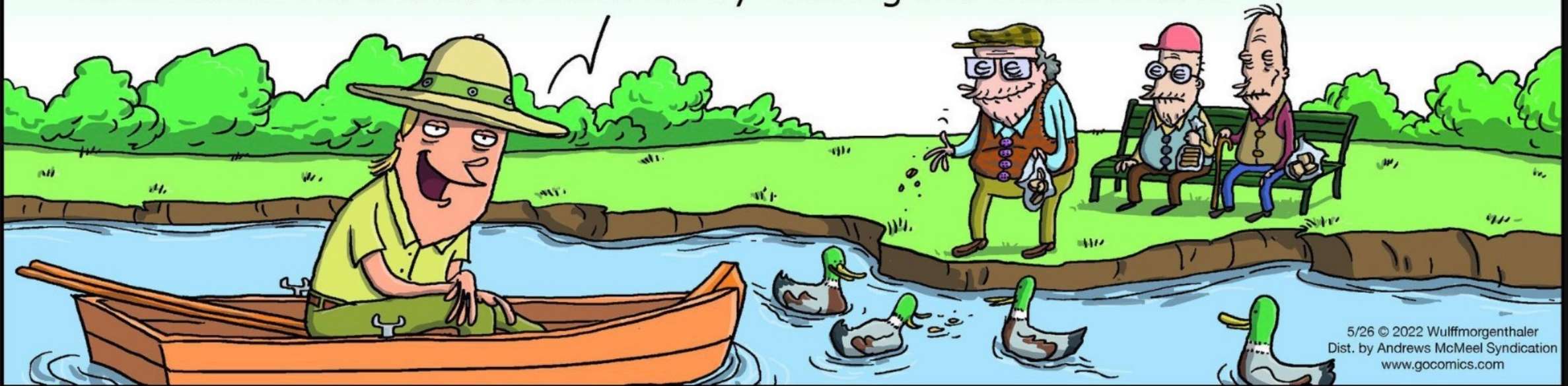
WHO Estimates as of 2021

- Children as young as four become aware of negative old-age stereotypes
- Their research found ageism is found in:
 - a. health care rationing by age;
 - b. forced retirements;
 - c. patronizing behavior toward the elderly;
 - d. not being listened to;
 - e. self-limiting behavior.
- A U.S. study found 1-in-7 \$ spent on health care for the top 8 most expensive conditions was due to ageism (\$63 billion)

Example 1 of Ageism in Media

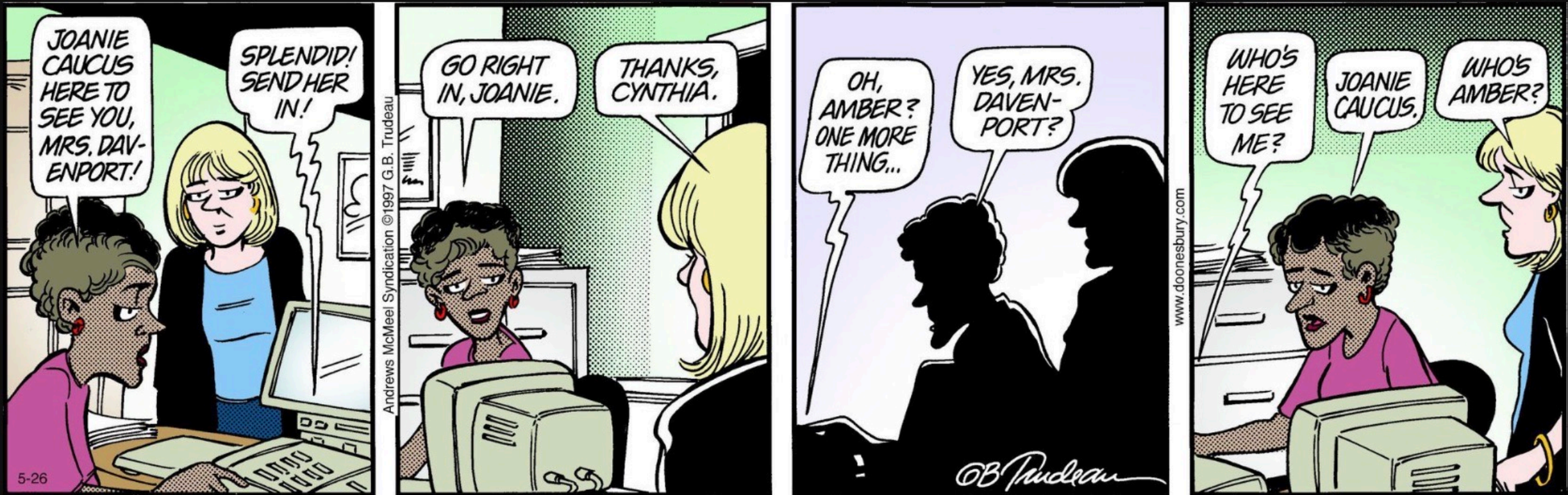
WuMo by Wulff & Morgenthaler

Welcome to another exciting episode of "The Human Animal."
The alpha-grandpa is always the one with the most buttons on his sweater. He shows dominance by feeding the ducks first ...

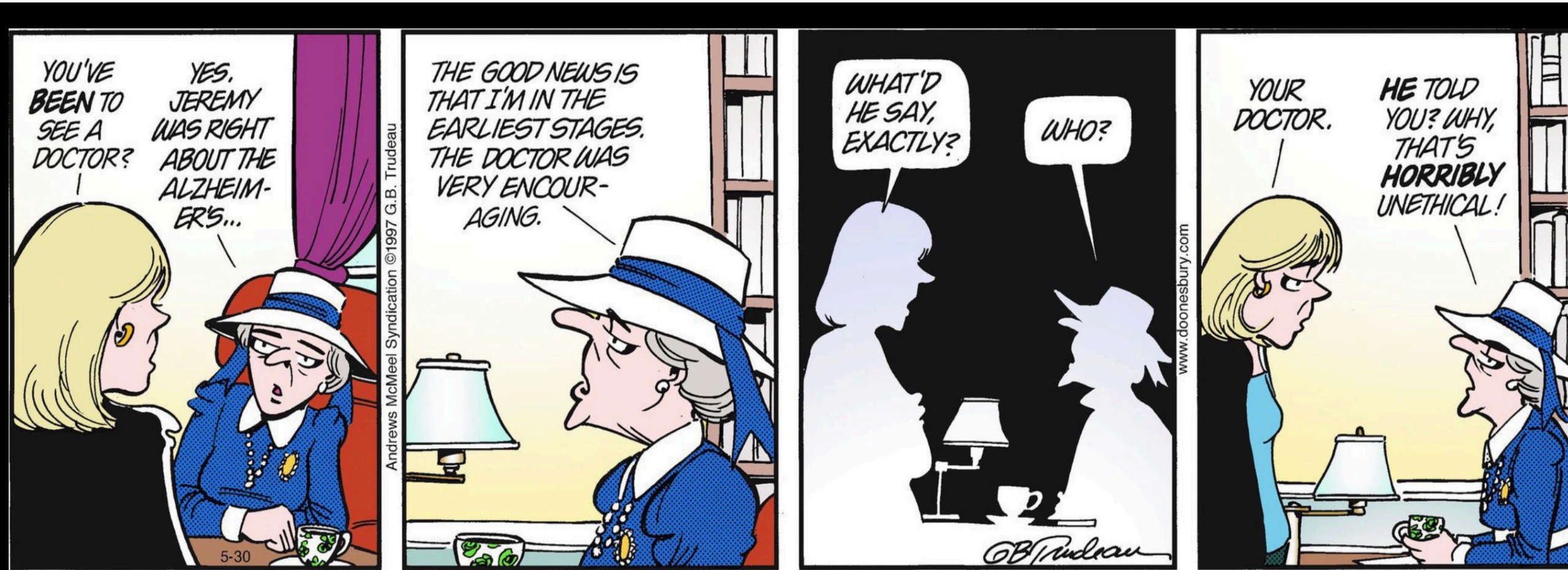


Garry Trudeau's "jokes" about dementia Are not funny

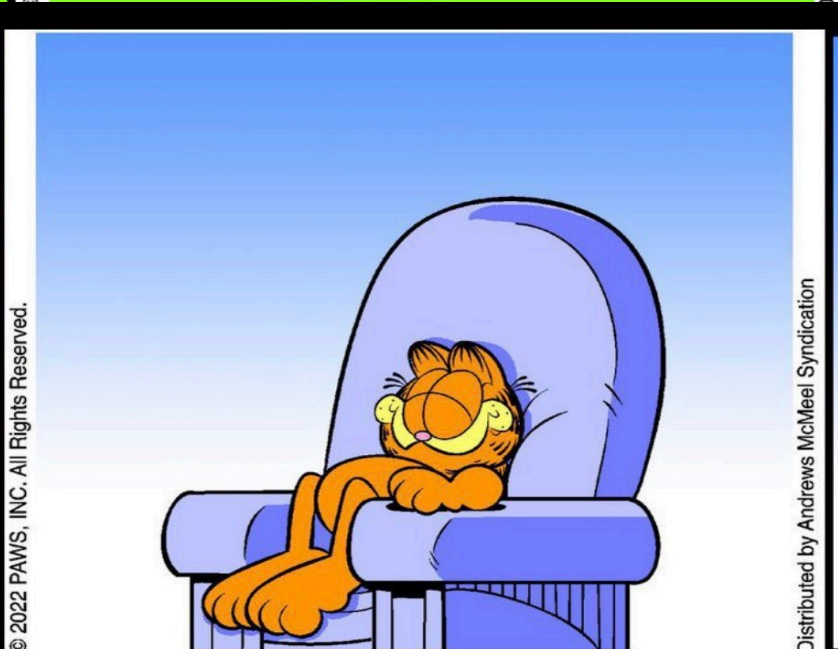
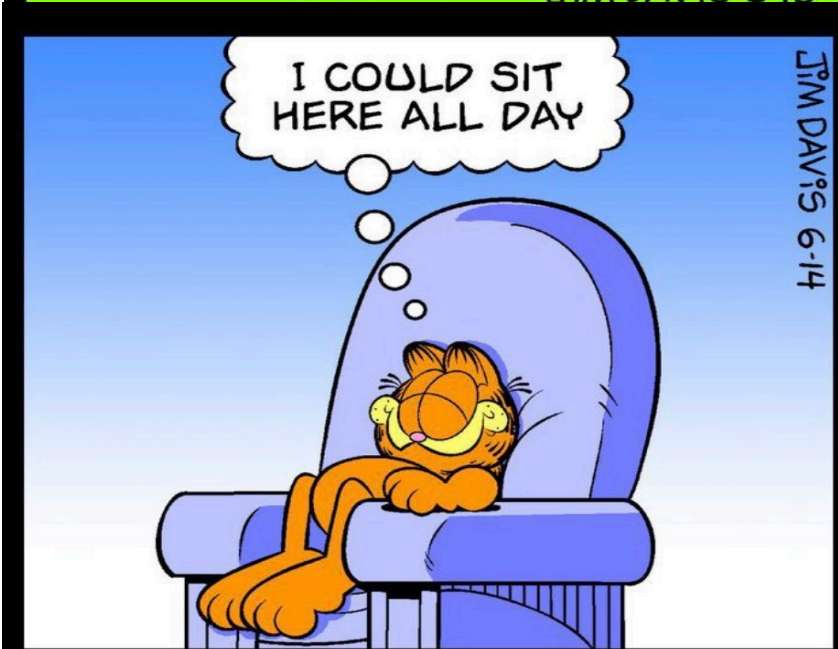
Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau



Again—There is little to Laugh at Here!



Even Garfield has ageist put-downs

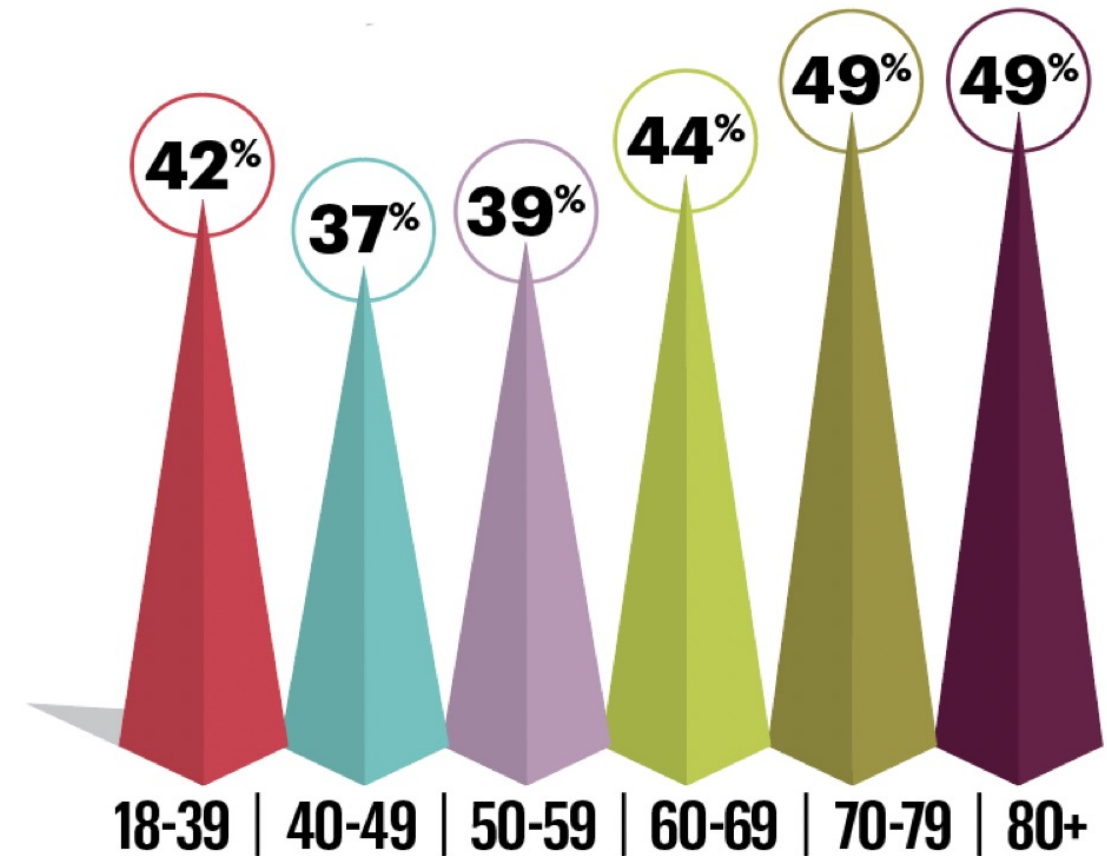


A False Stereotype: The Elderly are Unhealthy

- A 2021 AARP/National Geographic study shows seniors disagree
- Health is complex, and is reframed as we cope with more chronic & serious complaints
- EX: Ruth, a study participant in her 90s, still sings in a church choir and plays table tennis, despite using a walker. “Good health is being able to get up each day and do the things that you plan to do, and not dread them,” she says.

How would you rate your overall health?

Very good or excellent:



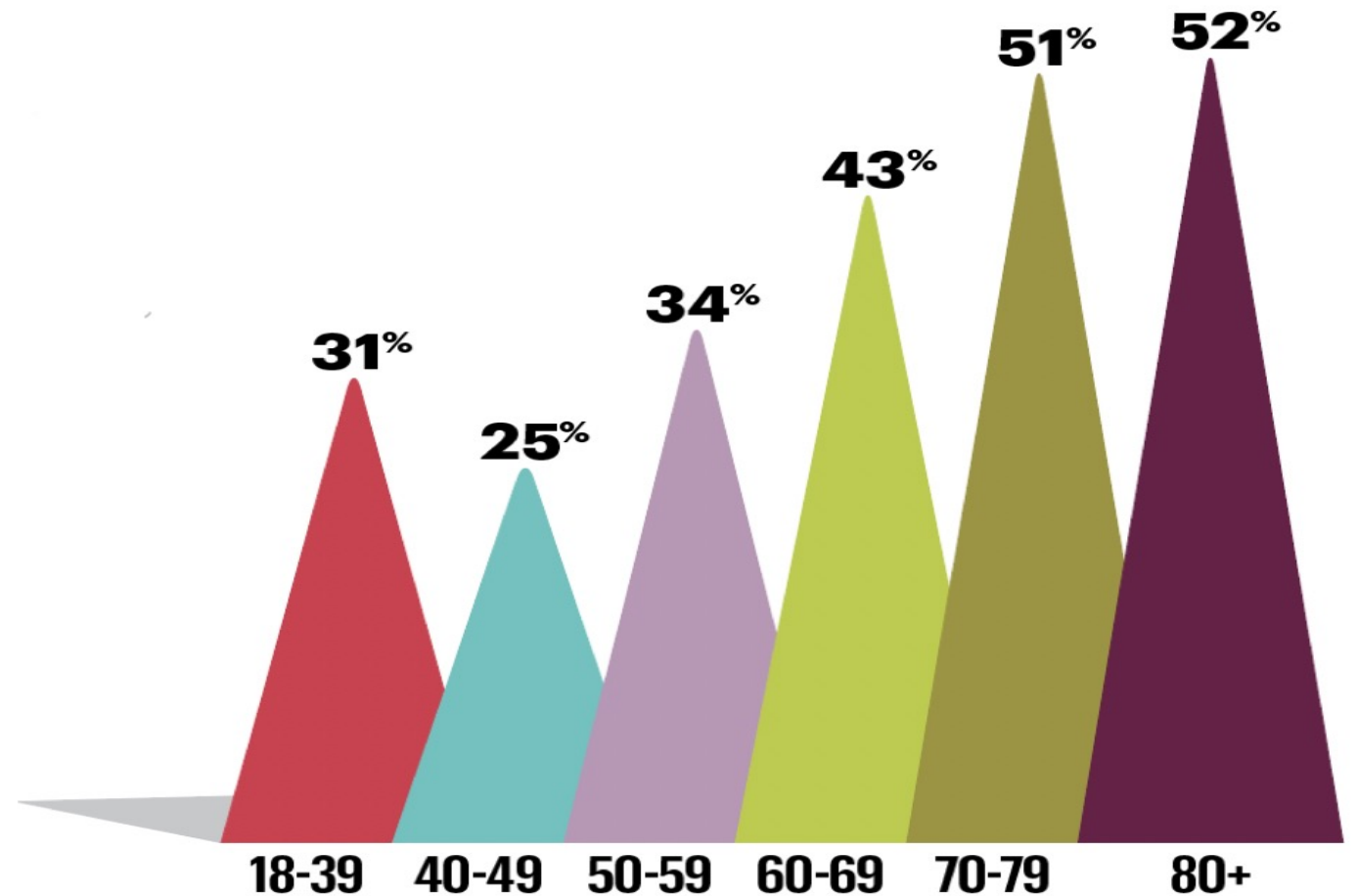
Another False Stereotype: We are Poor in our Old Age!

- 1/2 of 70 + see their financial situation as excellent or very good.
- This conflicts with articles claiming there is not enough being saved for retirement.
- Those 50+ control 3/4th of the total net worth of US households.
- Bottom line: seniors recognize they are financially better off than younger adults

AARP/National Geographic Study

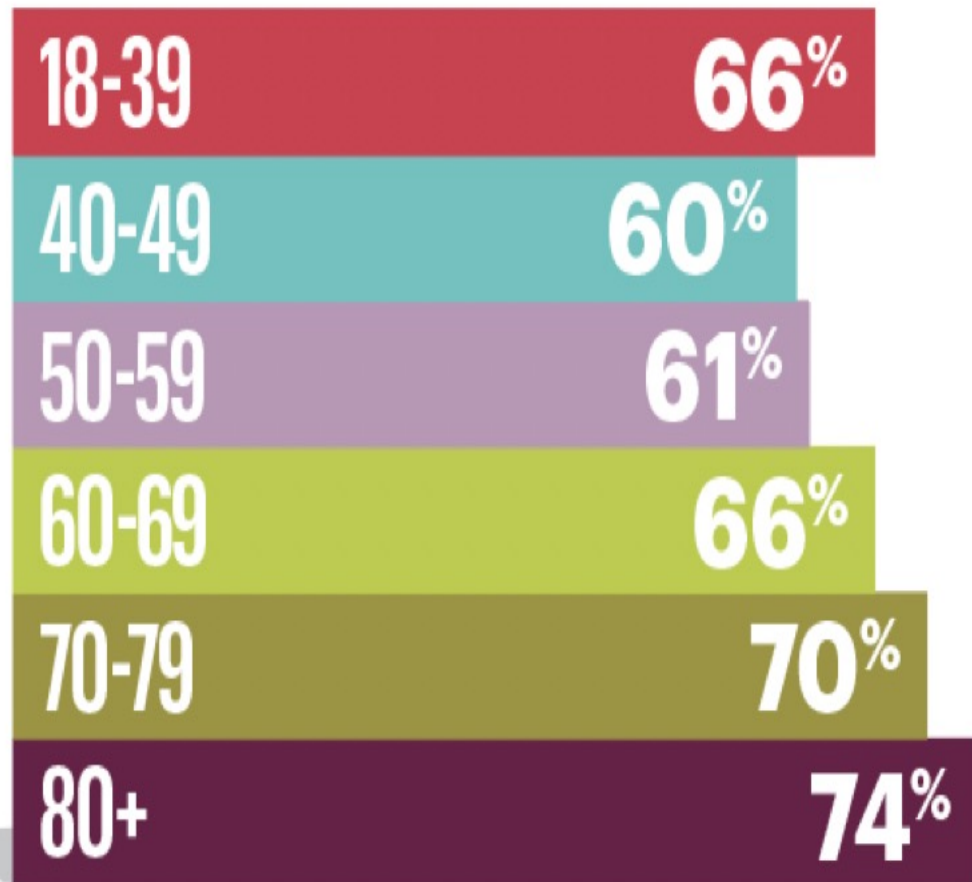
How would you rate your financial situation?

Excellent or very good:

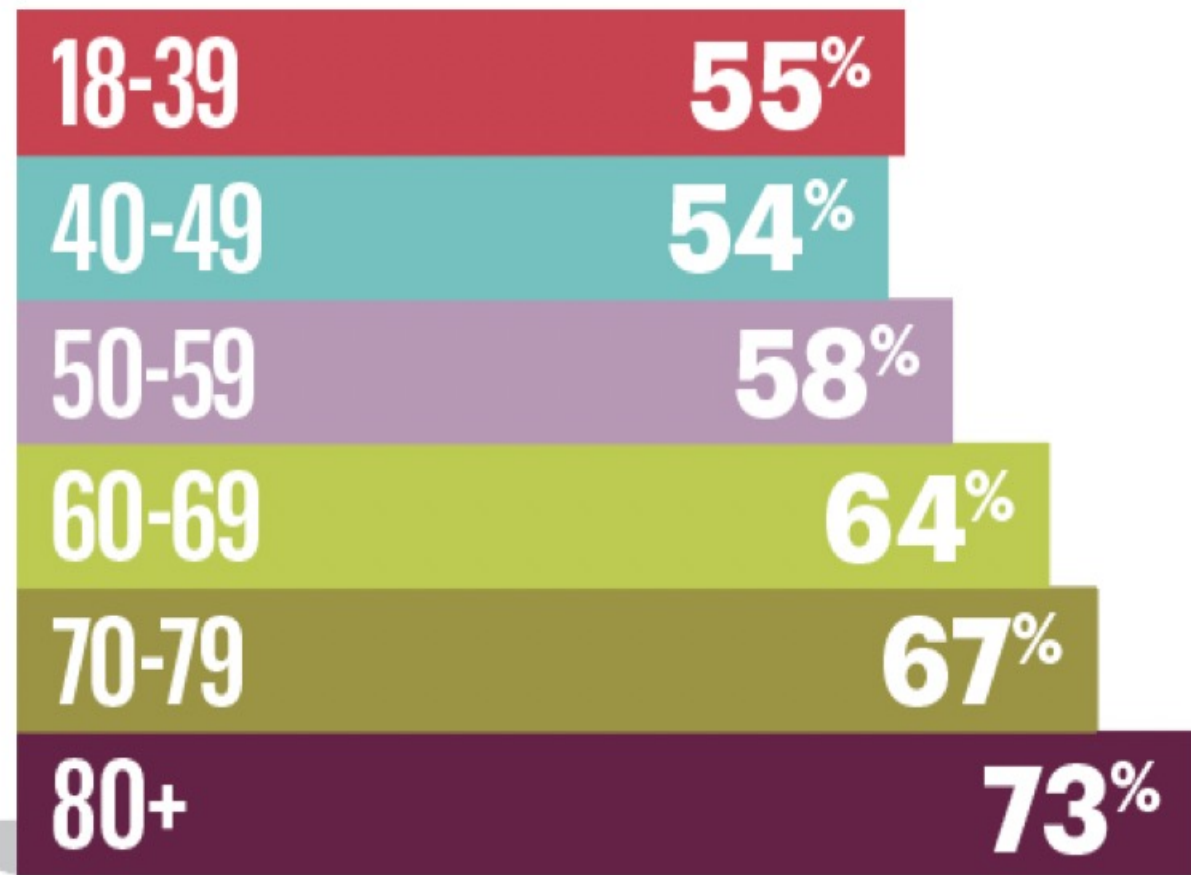


Seniors Take More Steps to Stay Healthy

Maintain a healthy weight:



Maintain physical stamina:



How About This for Healthy and Active?

- 93-year-old Betty Bromage takes to the skies strapped to the wing of a plane.
- This pensioner just finished her 5th daredevil challenge to raise money for a local hospice.
- Click [here](#) for video

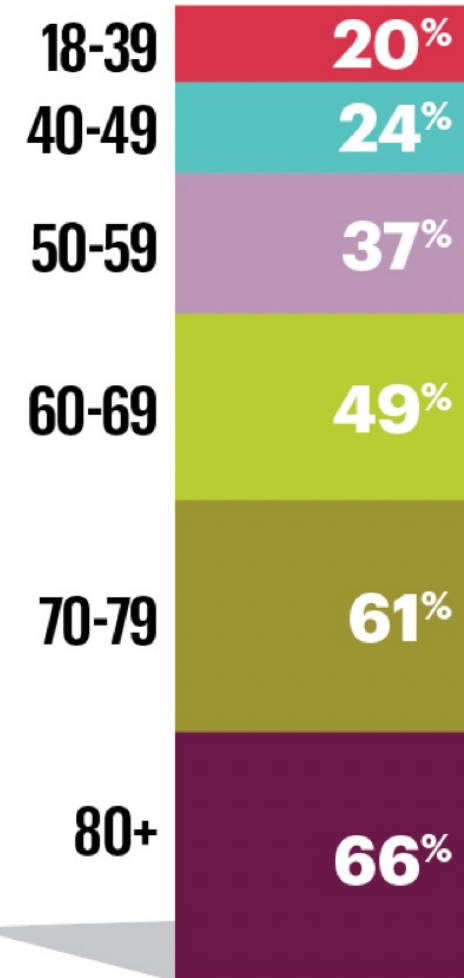


How would you rate the overall quality of your life, on a scale of 1 to 10?

Answered with a score of 8 or higher:

Seniors Enjoy
life MORE
than the non-
elderly

AARP/National Geographic Study

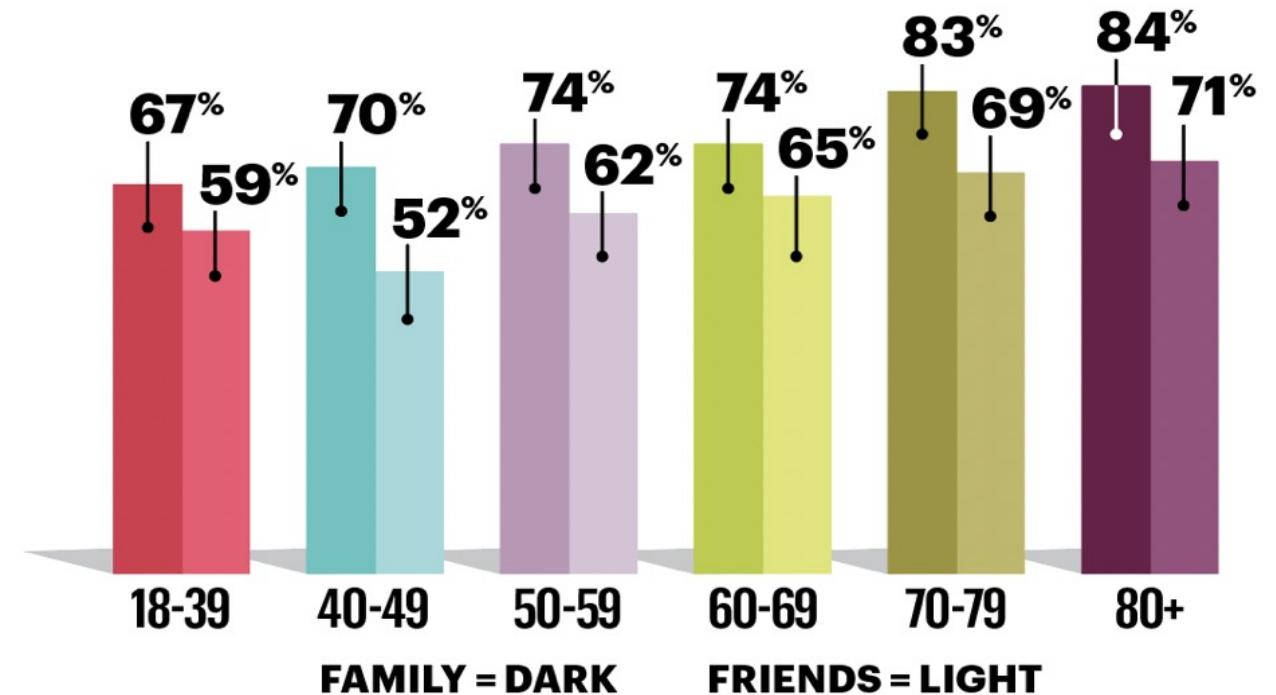


Why do we actually become more joyful as we age? Because of friends and family!

- **AT EVERY AGE**, family members contribute more to a person's sense of joy and sense of purpose than friends do.
- But “family” can take on a broader definition for many people.
- For a person without family (or estranged from them), friends are also a potent reservoir of support in the older years.

How much does each of the following relationships contribute to your sense of JOY?

Relationships with family or friends contribute to the greatest extent or a great deal:

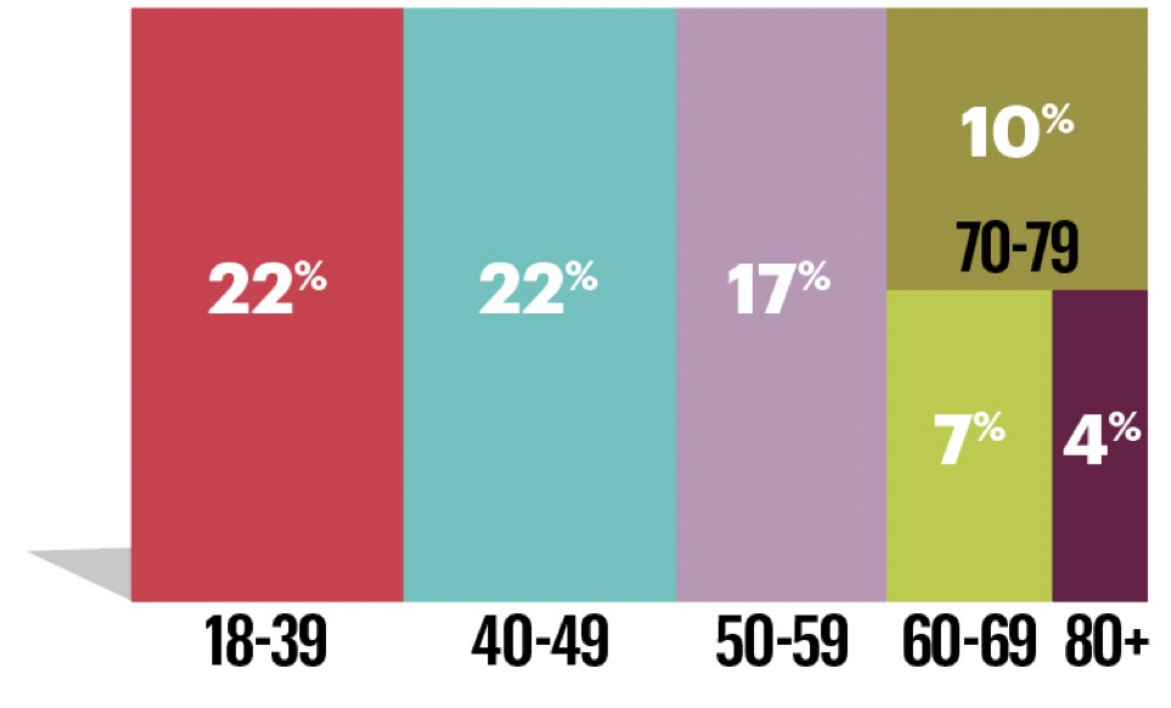


Seniors become *less* afraid of death as they age!

- Fear of death generally decreases as seniors get closer to it.
- Of greater concern for seniors is controlling the circumstances of dying.
- Seniors want choice and self-control when dying.
- Most AARP survey respondents endorsed medical assistance in dying.

How much do you fear death?

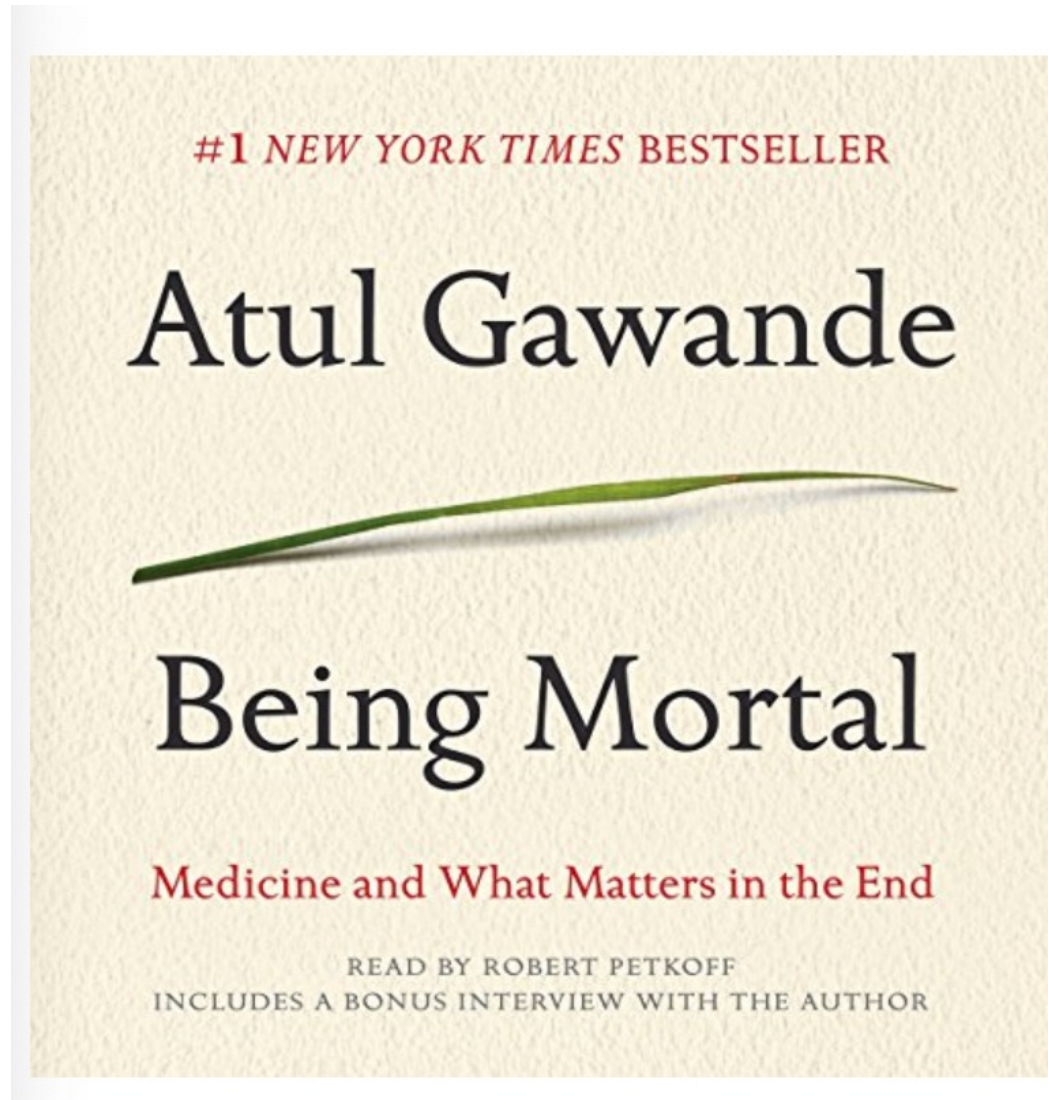
Extremely or very much:



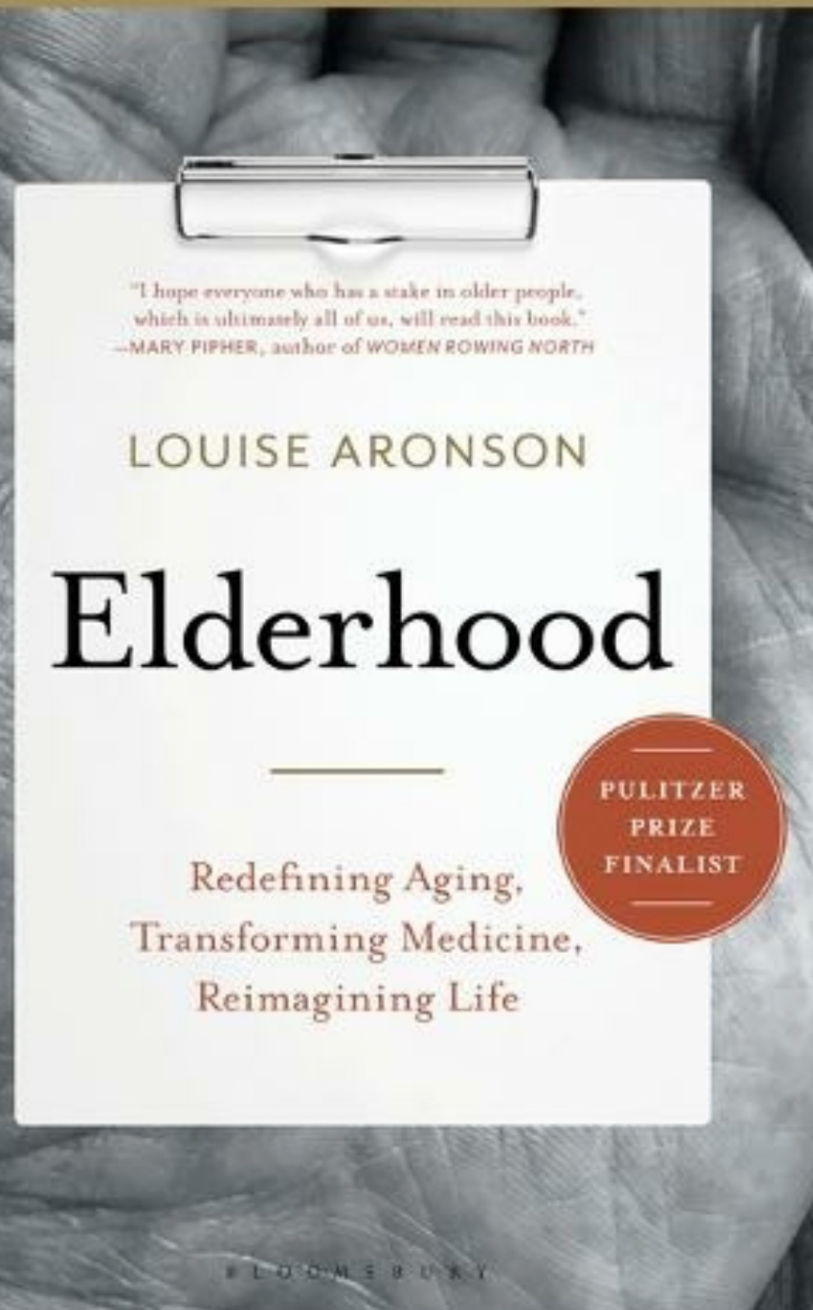
Despite illegality, Employment Age Discrimination Persists Today

- Discrimination by age in the workplace has been illegal since 1997
- Yet in 2020, age discrimination claims were 22% of all EEOC claims
- 1-in-4 workers over age 60 have personally experienced job discrimination
- It will only get worse! Only 3% of 65+ were in labor force in 2000, but it doubled in 2020 to 6.6%--and in 2030 it will TRIPLE to 9.5%
- AARP estimates the cost of U.S. labor force discrimination will total \$4 trillion by 2050 if it continues as is

- As our nation now has more elderly, more persons are falling ill and dying.
- *Being Mortal* (2014) highlights how the elderly are not listened to by the medical profession.
- Gawande argues that patients want quality of life at the end.
- His book was a call to arms to empower the elderly for better life endings!

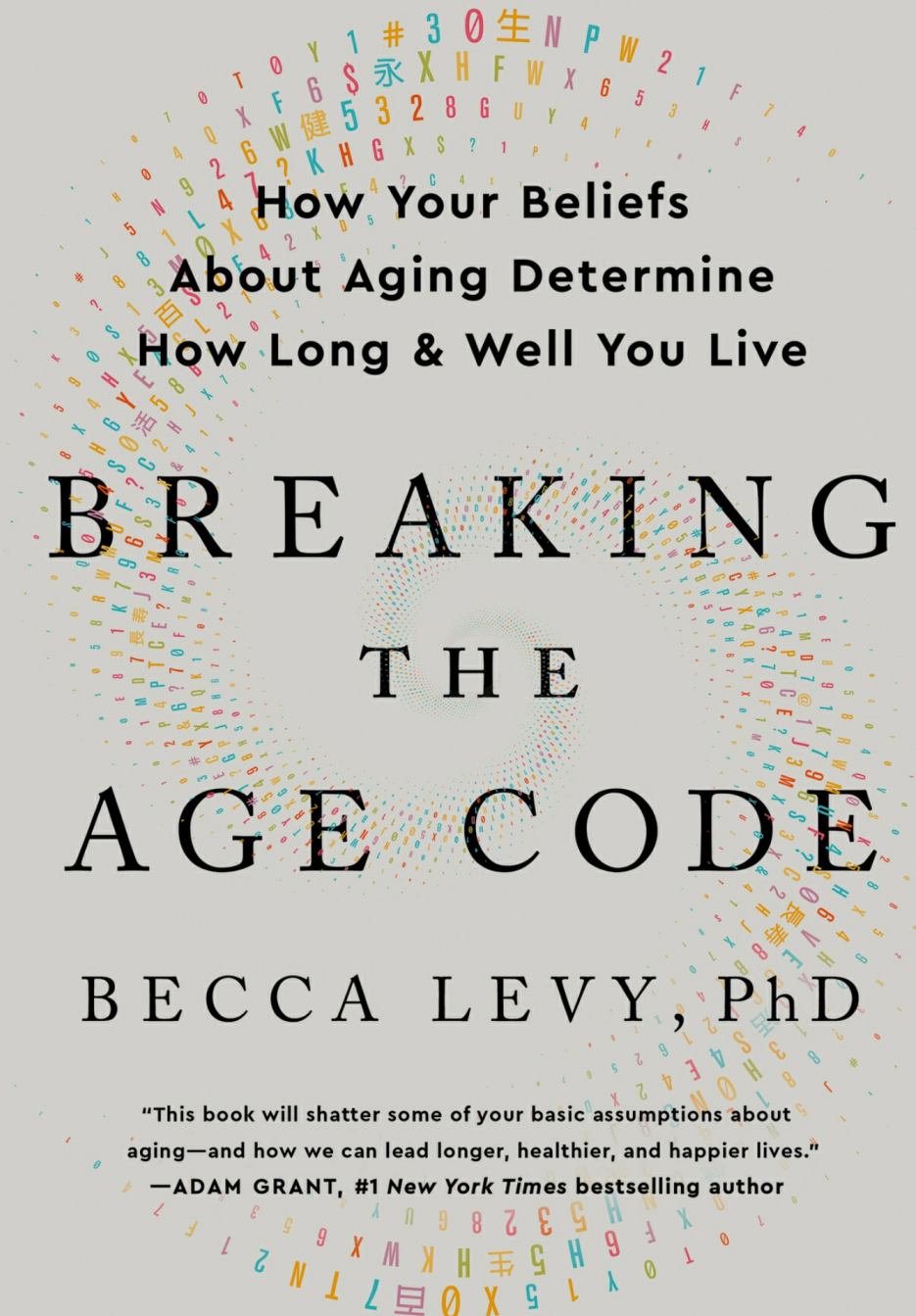


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



- The battle against ageism in healthcare continued in 2019. Aronson revealed how medicalization of aging negatively affects our views of older adults.
- Overemphasis on childhood diseases + ignoring geriatric concerns = misdiagnosis and maltreatment of elders
- Physicians are almost never trained in the problems of seniors
- Even hospice changed from help to a profit-drive
- In summary, she critiques the invasive and sometimes pointless treatments with which modern medicine battles the “disease of aging.”
- Aronson wants to replace medicine’s disease-centeredness with a new “care paradigm” emphasizing the human needs of patients.

- In 2022, Yale professor Beca Levy issued new research on the psychology of successful aging
- She showed how age beliefs can be improved to actually extend our lives by over 7 years!
- Health problems blamed on aging (memory loss, hearing, and heart disease) are actually caused by the negative age beliefs that dominate in the US
- Seeing the elderly as slow, confused, sedentary etc. can lead us to buy into such stereotypes!
- Ageist prejudices are socially acceptable & never challenged (WHO Research)
- Ads view oldsters as decrepit—we are brain-washed against being old starting at age 4
- Since seniors are segregated from younger people, these distorted views are perpetuated



3 Ways Ageism Fatally Infects Seniors

- **Psychological**: Elderly persons get low self-esteem when society sees them with disdain
- **Behavioral**: As older people accept negative beliefs about inevitably declining health, they give up or don't bother with healthy pursuits
- **Biological**: Research shows negative age beliefs increase stress as measured by cortisol levels and blood C-reactive protein (CRP)
- But she shows that age beliefs vary greatly by culture and are changeable—**Toxic beliefs can be challenged and overcome**

Age Beliefs-Not “Aging”-Predict Better Physical Performance Later in Life

- Levy used a longitudinal survey that asking participants, (50+) their age beliefs—Ex.: agree/disagree with statements such as, “As you get older, you are less useful.”
- Respondents were then scored on negative or positive age beliefs.
- Participants were also tested on their functional health every few years for the next two decades
- Those with positive age beliefs showed better functional health over 18 years than those of the same age with negative age beliefs
- This was the first research to demonstrate that age beliefs—rather than physical “aging”—were a major factor in later-life physical performance



A typical media view of seniors

- In a 2-month study, elderly respondents were randomly divided into 2 groups.
- One group received subliminal positive age beliefs and the other neutral age beliefs.
- Positives showed improved balance, walking speed, & physical exercise. These improved performances increased over time.

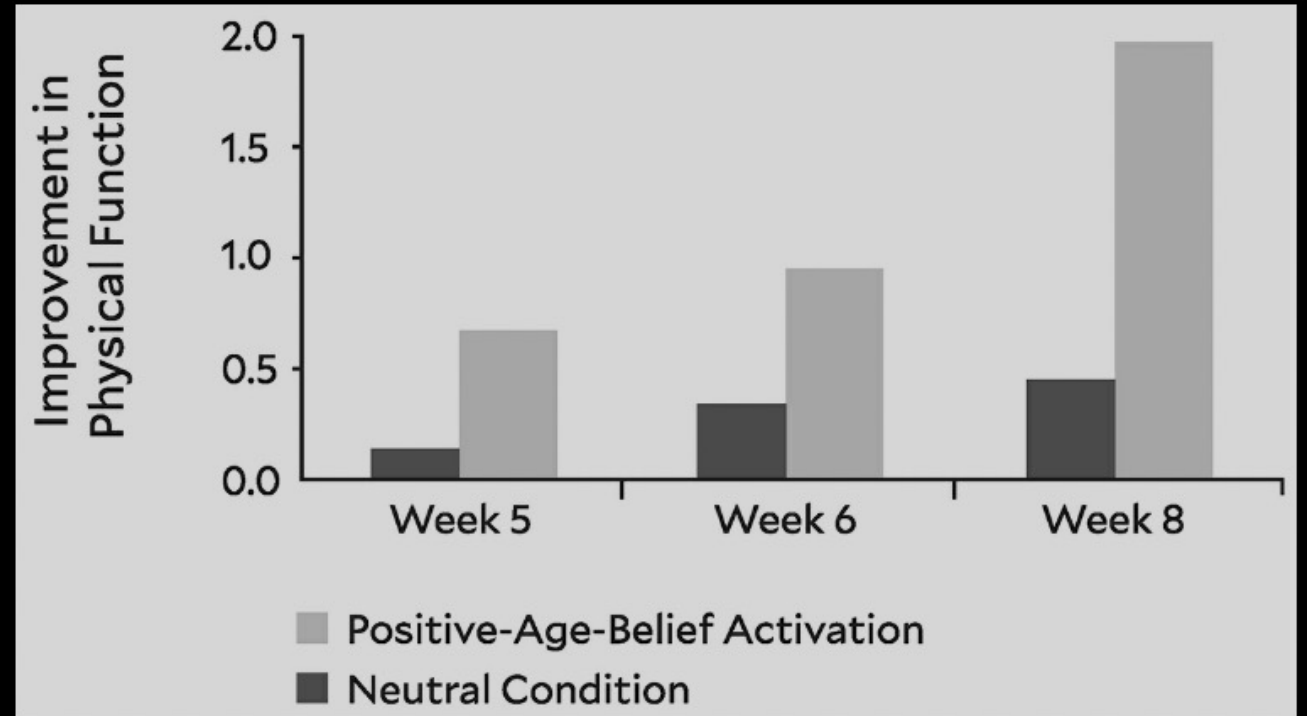


Figure 1 from: Levy, B. R., Pilver C., Chung, P. H., & Slade, M. D. (2014).

A later study showed that exposure to positive age beliefs can be used to produce better physical health

“Senior Moments”? Nope!

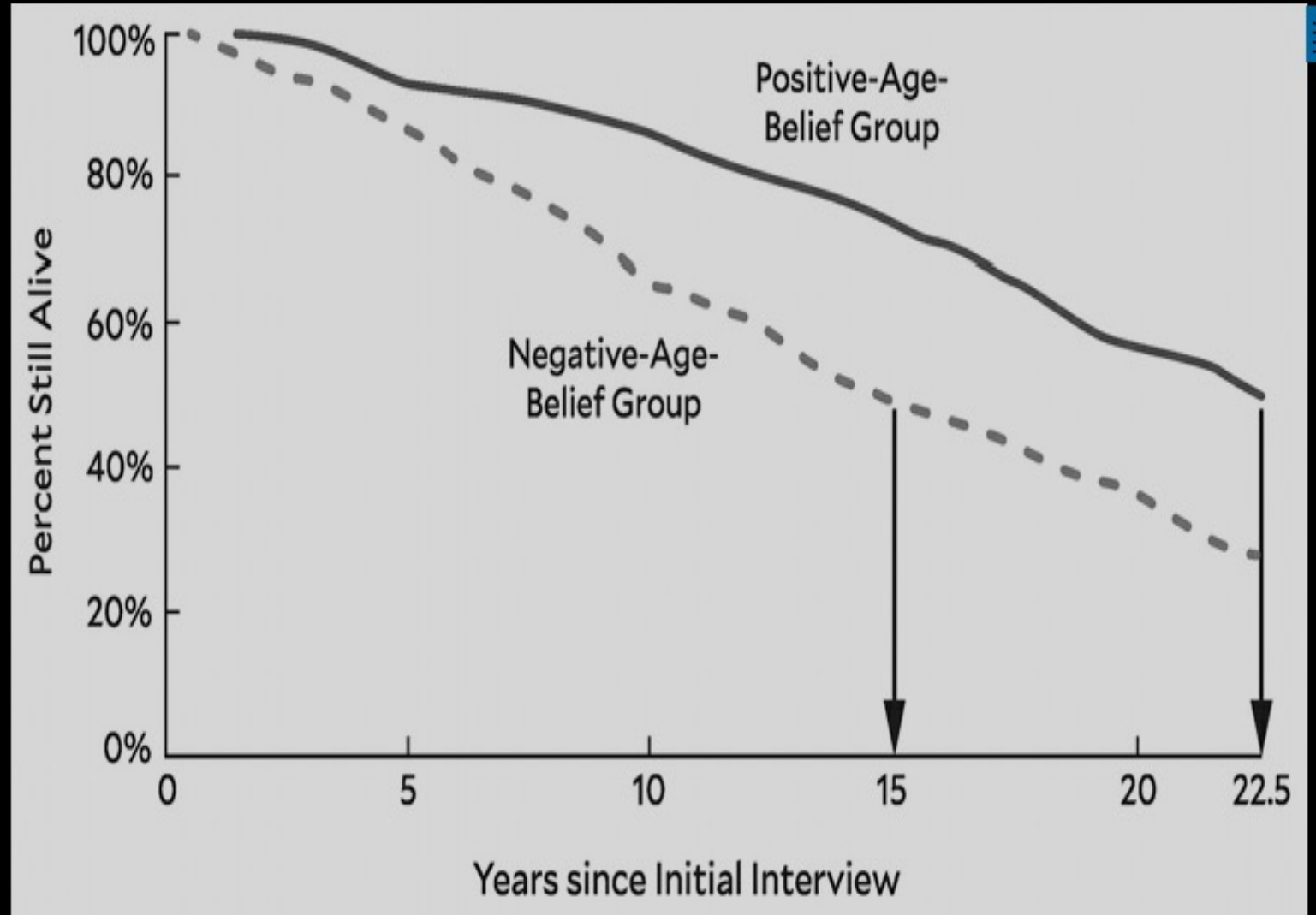
- Forgetting something can happen at any age, but the term “senior moments” was first used in 1977
- The stereotype that the brain deteriorates as we age is false
 - Semantic memory (recall of general knowledge, e.g., apple colors) improves;
 - Pattern recognition gets better after age 60
 - Procedural memory stays the same (routine behavior like riding a bike);
 - Episodic memory (recalling a specific experience) can diminish but is reversible with intervention
- Comparing Americans with Chinese (their Confucian culture reveres old age), Levy measured episodic memory
- Americans expressed the most negative age beliefs & scored worst on 4 memory tests—older Chinese tested as high as younger Chinese on memory
- Among only Americans, those with positive age beliefs = higher memory scores

Recovering from Physical & Mental Disability

- Assumption: older people do not recover well after severe injury or illness
- Yet 81% of elders completely recover within 1 year after their disabling episode
- Levy: those with **positive age beliefs were 44% more likely to recover** from their disability injury over 10 years vs. the “negatives”
- Positive age-belief patterns had more influence than age, sex, race, education, chronic illness, depression, and physical frailty on recovery. (**Multiple Regression**)
- Those with positive age beliefs are also **half as likely to have dementia**
- Positive-beliefs study subjects were much **less** likely to show higher levels of **mental stress** than the negatives
- In a sample of military veterans, she even found **suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and PTSD were also reduced** by positive age beliefs
- Studies also show that, **as we age—we grow more in emotional intelligence** & are better able to read other’s feelings

How to Add 7.5 Years to Life!

- Using data from the Ohio Longitudinal Study on Aging and Retirement, Levy found that participants with the most positive views of aging were living 7 & ½ years longer than persons with the most negative views (its impact was more than gender, race, SES, loneliness, and health status)

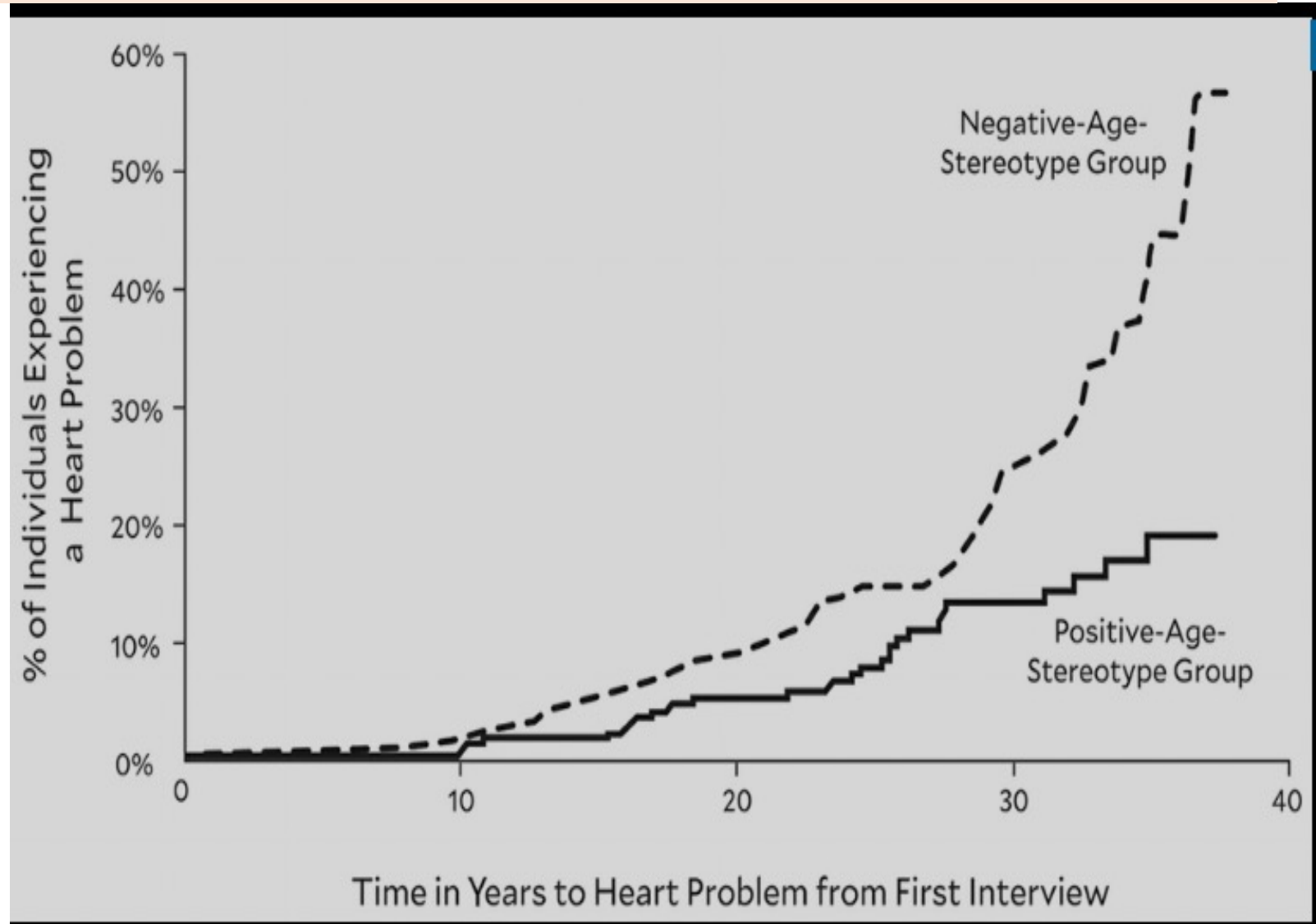


Why Ageism is Hard to See

- Using linguistic analysis of online documents, Levy showed **U.S. age beliefs growing more negative over 200 years!**
- Young people don't see it, but 8-in-10 seniors report encountering ageism regularly
- WHO: ageism is invisible because it is embedded in our culture (rules, norms, practices by people and organizations)—seen as “normal”
- Ex: older adults are nearly absent in movies, TV shows, studies, etc.
 - Only 1-in-9 characters who are 60+ are in the top 100 grossing films
 - And in these films, 44% record ageist comments/dialogue
- Corporate greed also promotes it: BOTOX, social media, ads = FEAR of aging
- Ask yourself, who said that skin wrinkles are ugly? Who benefits?
- Thus, 3-out of-4 Facebook groups having to do with older people vilify seniors

Not recognizing our own negative age beliefs = greater cardio failure later in life!

On a societal level, Levy estimates U.S. health costs due to ageism = \$63 billion/year. This is more than the cost of morbid obesity, one of the most expensive chronic conditions in America.



Levy's Cure for Ageism: ABC

- A: Increase **Awareness**. Flag words like “Boomer”, “dearie”, “geezer” + identify positive elderly role models (John Glenn, Betty White, RBG). Include age in diversity discussions, reject stereotyped greeting cards, etc.
- **Blame** Ageism, not Aging. Do not inculcate ageist beliefs, but instead i.d. the true societal sources. You are not decrepit simply because you have gray hair and a few wrinkles—ask who is saying this!
- **Challenge** negative age beliefs. Call it out when you see it—in private interactions or public forums. Pay specific attention to ads!
- She closes her book by urging an AGE LIBERATION movement, e.g., gray panthers. This includes *collective identification* (realize you are victimized, e.g., BLM, MeToo), *mobilization* (Face Book, Pass It On), and *protest*, (voting, tracking media, consumer boycotts) .
- Aim for a cultural redefinition of being old (Ex.: “Black is beautiful”). It is possible: 194 nations under WHO just launched the 1st international campaign to fight ageism!

Breakout Discussion Questions

- Review what you jotted down when thinking of an elderly person? Negative? Positive? Neutral? Why do you have your view?
 - Who is one of your older role models? Why do you admire this person?
 - What in your opinion is the key myth about aging. How would you challenge it?
- 