

AGEING + SEXUALITY = A LOVE STORY

OLD AGE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A SEXLESS DESTINATION

Yeats said Ireland “is no country for old men” and he was only 60 when he felt neglected.

Ireland has changed a lot, but old age is still a sexless place and ageism is an acceptable practice. It's time to write a new story about old age, this time we must include sexuality and let's make it a love story.

Our ageing population is often talked about as a drain on public resources, instead of critiquing how we as a society are organised and divided according to age. The majority of older adults are far from frail, lonely and vulnerable, but the media still insist on stereotypical representation.

By 2050, 1 in 5 people or 2 billion people will be over 60 and we must challenge the stereotypes of old adults as depressed, helpless and asexual. Ageist views take root in childhood and are cemented in adolescence. For older adults, they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

No, old people don't have to continue to express their sexuality, but the choice must be there. We must learn to age and we know we have done so successfully when we can continue to make the same choices as when younger, albeit with more assistance. Old people don't have to try to look younger, instead we should learn to embrace all signs of ageing as we do voluntary body modifications.

Studies in the early 2000s found negative views of older adults among students on issues such as productivity, independence and optimism.

Sexuality is an essential part of a person's being and expressing it is a human right. Despite this, there is a societal belief that old people are vulnerable and in need of care, not intimacy. Ageism is just as destructive as race or sex discrimination, but we trivialise and even laugh at older people's ageing issues. Birthday cards often portray older adults as weak and failing and their sexuality as dirty, depraved or lecherous. Job advertisements mention young and dynamic workplaces instead of outright saying, we don't want older people, missing out on the most effective dynamic of all – the wisdom of older people mixed with the energy of younger people. In films, we see young naked bodies, but never older people's naked bodies. Ageism is still socially acceptable. Ageism affects us all. When we are young, we laugh at the stereotypes of older adults, but this -ism also teaches us to fear old age. We see old age as unnatural. We continue to laugh at older adults when portrayed as old, sick and costing too much. Not all old adults want to settle for childminding of the grandchildren, they already raised children. Many want to take advantage of the liberation that comes with ageing. More and more older adults start reinterpreting what it means to be old. Old age doesn't have to be what they have been told. Old age is not a place of permanent illness. We need to start looking at old age as a process, not an affliction. We are all affected by continuing to accept ageism.

Older adults are afforded love, but not sex and especially not casual sex. If an older person is single, they are almost automatically seen as asexual. We are sexual beings, but as old age is now, we must endure a long stretch of sexlessness before death. The notion of parents not having sex is born out of the religious idea that once children have been made, there is no reason to have sex anymore. Feeling old rather than being old can affect the quality of an older person's sex life more than medical reasons. There is help, but we need to start talking openly about sex and ageing.

In the early 1800s in Ireland, old age began at 40. 200 years later, old age begins at 65, but in 2020, 65 is not old. Sexual pleasure among the ageing population wasn't recognised until 1957. It took almost another 30 years before older adults were included in sexual activity research. It wasn't until 2009 when we fully realised that sexual interest, desire and capacity remains as we age. Older adults who have internalised the discriminatory view of themselves laugh at themselves instead of speaking up for themselves.

The pandemic exposed how easily ageism hides behind the language of care — and that way of thinking did not end when restrictions lifted. During COVID-19, older adults were confined, restricted, and spoken about as a problem to be managed. Calling this *cocooning* did not make it compassionate. It made it palatable. It sent a clear message: older adults could not be trusted to judge risk, make decisions, or live their own lives.

That logic remains. Older adults are no longer locked down, but they are still being quietly pushed out of view. They are less visible in public spaces, absent from cultural narratives, and excluded from conversations about sex, pleasure, and intimacy. This is not protection. It is control through invisibility.

Policy continues to treat older people as a single, fragile group rather than as individuals with agency. Decisions about housing, healthcare, mobility, and social participation are routinely made *about* older adults, not *with* them. Overprotection is framed as responsibility, but it functions as restriction. It limits autonomy, reinforces dependence, and feeds internalised ageism.

The damage is not abstract. Reduced physical contact, shrinking social worlds, and the ongoing discomfort with older adults' sexuality have real consequences for mental and physical health. During the pandemic, everyone was told to stop touching, hugging, and kissing. Those who complied most — and who continue to pay the price — are older adults. Human touch did not suddenly become less important with age; it became harder to access.

Older adults do not want to be hidden, managed, or infantilised. They do not need to be shielded from risk, sex, or difficult conversations about death. Many are already comfortable with all three. What they do not need is to be endlessly described as vulnerable. That label justifies exclusion while pretending to offer care.

Ageism is not a side effect of COVID; it was exposed by it. If we continue to accept policies and social norms that remove older adults from public life in the name of safety, we are not protecting them. We are denying them full citizenship — including the right to intimacy, desire, and pleasure.

When asked about regrets, older adults usually wished they had more sex when they had the opportunity, but sex is for life and it is time to break this taboo. Older adults want to be in

charge of their own life for life. We live longer and older adults want to be contributing, participating citizens for as long as they possibly can.

In 1961, a new theory of ageing developed by social scientists called the disengagement theory argued that older adults would naturally disengage from society while waiting to die, but the study is dated. Older adults long for intimacy and sex. They continue to experience intense attraction to people, and thanks to the internet they don't have to end up alone when a partner dies. We have to afford independence to our ageing population. The old person can manage themselves. We should support older adults when they ask for support and make it easier for people to talk about things we don't talk about, sex and death. Old age is not a waiting game for death. Erotic power and old age are compatible.

Sexual health is public health, but doctors don't talk about sex with their older patients, they see grey hair and think sex is not possible, but good quality sex means better quality life. Older adults are treated as if they should happily just wait out the rest of their life instead of enjoying it. We are used to hearing older adults talk about aches and pains. We must encourage conversations about pleasure and orgasms and how to maintain a healthy sex life.

Older adults up to the ninth decade engage in sex for pleasure. Pleasure is a right, but it is not just about physical pleasure; being sexually active creates deep intimacy, more honest and open communication, more significant connection. Older adults who engage in sex are present in the moment; they transcend rather than worrying about when their time is up.

Doctors must ask about older adults' sex life, how they are getting on, how it feels, what they might need help with. Sex for life is good for all society. Our sexuality is part of all our identities, and having sex is as important as being able to walk. Whether that is solo sex, a twosome or even and even a threesome is up to the older adult.

Sex is medicine, even if that is just masturbation and not full-on penetration. Old people's sex life is as diverse as young people's sex lives. While bursting myths we must also be careful to not create new ones. Older adults don't have to look younger than their age to enjoy a healthy sex life. Older people don't need retouching, they need human touch.

The internet affords older adults what society doesn't give to them, sexual freedom. Here they can, express, experiment and challenge the idea that they are asexual, uninterested and/or incapable of being sexual. Older adults are using the internet to explore their sexual identities and experiences. They have internalised ageism, but many now choose to be part of bursting myths about themselves.

We must start calling out ageism when we encounter it. We must encourage open dialogue about sex with our older population. Openness about sexual desire, needs and problems is essential to burst myths and break taboos of older adults and eroticism. We must learn how to grow old and remain equal. Sexuality and intimacy are as important as we age as when we are young. We must stop overprotecting older people.

Sex for life starts by including ageing in our sex education. By making sex a natural part of the whole life, we learn that it is ok to refresh our knowledge as we age, not stop having sex because of the menopause, andropause or whatever condition or disease might make sex difficult, painful or even impossible.

A recent study asked older adults what is important in affirming positive sexuality as we grow older, and they mentioned tenderness and care, altruism and gratitude, attractiveness, positive communication, sexual activity, good health and physical condition, supportive relationship, eroticism and feeling active and alive. They underlined the importance of tenderness, care and eroticism for sexually active older adults.

While society has denied older adults their sexuality for centuries, older people of the digital age are going online proving that they are not resistant to change or incapable of learning new skills. Older adults have larger companionship networks online. As we age and lose life partners or family ties loosen, older adults go online to find company. Sex education for older adults is also necessary and the Internet is a good place to start. Sex education on the Internet prevents the user from being shamed and older adults can speak freely about all the issues they have been told doesn't matter.

We need to encourage older people to continue to have active sex lives, it is not just good for their own health, it is good for society. Due to a lot of misconception around sex and ageing, it can take time.

Facts:

Women over 60 can orgasm, even after a hysterectomy.

Men over 70 can get an erection even without Viagra.

That means even educated people are uneducated when it comes to pleasure; it doesn't wane, it increases or changes.

Pleasure and eroticism are for life. Sex appeal is timeless. We need pro-ageing attitude instead of anti-ageing attitude. It is time to reinterpret both ageing and sex as we age. Sexual appetite changes, but it doesn't disappear. Sex is an essential part of a relationship.

Instead of fighting the ageing process, we must learn to embrace old age. 65 is not old. 70 is the new 50, and if we're lucky enough to live a long life, we also have a right to express ourselves sexually for as long as we may want. Pleasure and eroticism are tools for enjoying life, and older people deserve to enjoy life until death, not just until the pension.