

CABS podcast

Whose version of ageing well?

Dr Manik Gopinath, Dr Catherine Pestano, Dr Philippa Waterhouse, Dr Mahera Ruby, Dr Jennifer Shepherd and Dr Jitka Vseteckova:

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Aging well sounds fairly straightforward until you ask five researchers what the evidence actually says. I am Manik Gopinath, Senior Lecturer in aging and your host today. And you are listening to the Open University's Center for Aging and Biographical Studies, CABS for short, Research Group Podcast.

Today, I'm joined by five colleagues whose work spans everything from nutrition and daily habits to menopause, housing and history, and what aging means across different communities. Hello, everyone. I think our listeners would love to know who's in the room today. I am going to ask the panel to introduce themselves, just your name, and briefly state what your research focus is on.

DR CATHERINE PESTANO: Hi. I'm Dr. Catherine Pestano, Social Worker, Community Musician, and Menopause Activist. I'm an Open University visiting fellow in the reproductive and sexual health research group, exploring anti-oppressive and creative ways to thrive through menopause and beyond.

DR PHILIPPA WATERHOUSE: Hi. I'm Philippa Waterhouse, a Senior Lecturer in health at the Open University. My research interests are around work and family in sub-Saharan Africa. And I'm currently involved in a research project on young motherhood in West Africa.

DR MAHERA RUBY: Hi. I'm Mahera Ruby. I'm a visiting Fellow with the Open University. And I'm involved with the ABAJ project, Amar Bari, Amar Jibon, exploring housing, aging, and well-being with a focus on multigenerational living.

DR JENNIFER SHEPHERD: Hi. I'm Jennifer Shepherd. I'm a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing. And I'm a literary historian. I read books from the past to help me understand what it felt like to get older 100 years ago.

DR JITKA VSETECKOVA: Hi. My name is Jitka Vseteckova. I'm the Chair of the Carers Research Group at the Open University and Senior Lecturer in health and social care. My research focuses on aging and aging well via supporting people across UK and internationally, diverse communities to learn and improve their health and well-being over the long term.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Thank you. So let's start to unpack aging well. Now, based on your research, what is the one factor in aging well that you think people most underestimate or overlook? Jitka, let's start with you.

DR JITKA VSETECKOVA: Thank you, Manik. So people are living longer today, but that doesn't mean that we all actually are necessarily living better, although longer. By the time we reach 60, it is likely that one in seven of us will be living with one or multiple health conditions.

The good news is that our research shows that small daily changes can make a huge difference to how we feel and how we age. Getting up from your chair for five minutes every hour, drinking a glass of water with your tea or coffee, doing a quick puzzle once a day, dancing to your favorite song, calling a friend really, really can go a long way.

The five pillars for aging well model-- which condenses the nutrition, hydration, physical, social, and cognitive stimulation, and the research around the five pillars via the Aging Well Public Talk Series and Take Five to Age Well, both educational interventions-- shows that these small but daily healthy habits practiced consistently can help people learn, prevent ill health, boost our overall health and well-being, and help us to live independently for longer.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: That's a really hopeful picture, Jitka. Now, Catherine, you would agree with that. But do you think for many people, and particularly women, accessing even those small steps towards well-being is far from simple?

DR CATHERINE PESTANO: Thanks, Manik. There is a stage of life for people-- anyone born with a womb and ovaries-- that half the population will reach that lasts for years, sometimes decades, and yet we still struggle to speak about it openly. Menopause is often framed as a private biological transition, something individual, something quiet to manage discreetly. Living it, I say that menopause is not just a biological event. It is also social, political, and deeply shaped by inequality and gendered expectations of society.

Some are told their symptoms are just stress, others cannot access treatment. Many are navigating menopause while carrying out invisible labor, caring for children, aging parents and peers, communities, and workplaces simultaneously. These societal oppressions, coupled with exploitative employment practices, can lead to adrenal burnout at midlife. Aging well should not be a privilege reserved for a few. It should be a collective commitment to dignity, care, and visibility across the life course.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: And does inequality look different depending on who you are and where you live? Mahera, your thoughts.

DR MAHERA RUBY: Oh, yes. When you speak to minoritized older adults, you begin to appreciate there are real nuances in what aging well actually means. And this matters. The elders from long standing established communities in East London told us that during the research project that the place and belonging are central to aging well, a preference for aging within neighborhoods that feel linguistically and culturally comfortable, and a strong desire for multi-generational living with adult children.

They tell us that it is important for their sense of belonging and identity, protection from racism and the emotional, financial, and practical benefits it brings. Yet many of these preferences are formed within systems that disadvantage through poor housing and socioeconomic inequalities.

For many, we found that the choice to live this way is also shaped by having very few other options, yet goes largely unrecognized by housing policy and mainstream housing services and aging services.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Right. So limited options in old age, they do not appear suddenly, do they, Philippa?

DR PHILIPPA WATERHOUSE: So when we talk about aging well, we don't often think of young people. However, aging doesn't start later in life. It is a process that is shaped by our experiences throughout our lives. Research I'm involved in looks at the experiences of young, unmarried mothers in West Africa. It shows how dominant views about what is the right pathway into adulthood can shape both immediate well-being and long term life chances of individuals.

When young women become mothers outside of marriage, they often face stigma, discrimination, and the withdrawal of support from family, friends, and the wider community, with long lasting consequences. These include disruption or exclusion from schooling, limited access to services, and expectations of financial dependence at an age where options are few. These experiences remind us how people are treated when they are young can shape the course of their lives.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: So, that's very interesting. How well our lives go as young people goes to some extent in shaping how well our later lives go. But, Jennifer, if we look back 100 years ago, what does that tell us about aging well?

DR JENNIFER SHEPHERD: Thanks, Manik. Well, I've read a lot of fiction from the past about getting older, and what strikes me is that even asking the question, how do we age well in

Britain 100 years ago would itself have been a bit of a luxury. And that's because for most people, life expectancy was so much shorter than it is today, especially for women.

But for those women who survived to 50 and beyond in the past, my research suggests that there were three things that really mattered most in terms of aging well. First thing that occurs to me is older women wanted to have their physical health taken seriously by medical professionals even 100 years ago, and not to have concerns about their bodies dismissed. I get the sense that sometimes that continues to be a concern for people today, so it'll feel really relevant.

Secondly, aging well also meant to be seen by society, and not just to disappear with age. Women writers 100 years ago were actively fighting invisibility that seemed to come with aging, particularly for women. And, again, that might feel a bit current today. Thirdly, aging well was linked to strong social networks.

So an aging person would want to receive support but also give support, and be meaningfully involved in that network of support. And I think it's interesting that Mahera has also noted that in her research in East London today. But probably the most profound thing I've discovered in my research about aging well in the past is that it's about appreciating the significance of the story of your own life. That's not specific to any time period, but it's that meaning making, I'd suggest, that still matters most of all today when it comes to aging well.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: There is so much to reflect on there. Now, one final question to all of you. And in one sentence, please, what is assumption about aging well do you most wish to challenge? Philippa, let's start with you.

DR PHILIPPA WATERHOUSE: The assumption I want to challenge is that aging well is something that starts later in life. Actually, it's something that starts from birth. The way young people are supported, included or excluded, it shapes their opportunity and their long term well-being.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Thank you. Jitka.

DR JITKA VSETECKOVA: One of the assumption I would like to challenge via the research we do with the team through the Age Well Public Talk Series and the Take Five to Age Well is ageism, it's often unspoken of but it's always there. And the fact that people can learn and can improve their health and well-being, and it's never too late.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Thanks. Catherine.

DR CATHERINE PESTANO: Thank you. Well, another thought about context, aging doesn't happen in a vacuum, but in a highly pressurized intersectional web. On a positive note, extreme experiences at this stage can propel us into taking stock, rejecting or renegotiating some of these pressures together. That way, new freedoms lie.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Thank you, Catherine. Mahera.

DR MAHERA RUBY: Well, to extend on that, the assumption I would like to challenge is that aging well looks the same for everyone. In reality, aging well must be understood within cultural contexts, lived experience, and structural constraints. Otherwise, we risk designing systems that don't truly serve the communities they're meant to support.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Thank you. And Jennifer.

DR JENNIFER SHEPHERD: Yeah, well, I'd say that aging well is not just about the state of your body, though, of course, that is very important. My research suggests that to live well at any age and in any historical period is to feel that the story of your life really has meaning.

DR MANIK DEEPAK GOPINATH: Hm. You know what strikes me most after listening to all of you is that aging well is not single story or a single journey. And it looks different for every one

of us. And what today's discussion also reminds me is that aging well is not a personal triumph or a failure. And as many of you have said, how well we age is not simply down to individual choice or willpower. It's shaped by the communities we belong to, the systems that support us or ignore us, and whether society chooses to see us at all.

Also, it starts earlier than we think in how young people are treated and included right now. It lives in the small daily habits that genuinely make a difference, but it also lives in the bigger structures around us that need to change too. And, importantly, the message I am getting is that both matter.

Now, while we could keep this conversation going in the room all day, we had loved to bring our listeners into the conversation. So tell us, what does aging well look like in your life? And what's made it easier or harder than it should be? Leave us your thoughts in the comments.

And if you're interested in contemporary debates on aging, please tune in into the CABS public seminar series and the Open University OpenLearn courses, the links for which you can find in the description box below. A very big thank you to all our guests today, Jitka Vseteckova, Catherine Pestano, Mahera Ruby, Philippa Waterhouse, and Jennifer Shepherd. I'm Manik Gopinath, and you were listening to whose version of aging well.