

Sexuality in the Elderly, Nicole Perretta

In general, people view sex and sexuality in older people in one of three ways: 1.)

Sexuality simply does not exist. Many young people have difficulty believing that older people are sexual beings, possibly because this would mean accepting their parents as having sexual interests. 2.) Sexuality is funny. This is shown by the number of birthday cards which deal with sexuality in later life as a humorous topic. 3.) Sexuality is disgusting, "Elderly person who deviates from the stereotype and wants an active sexual life may be derided as foolish (a 'dirty old man')". The elderly themselves are reluctant to verbalize their sexual feelings, for fear of being seen as depraved, or lecherous, so that myths about their sexuality are internalized. Many older people engage in sexual activities until their eighties or even their nineties.

In general, sexual activity declines with advancing years. The causes for this may be time-related, medical or psychosocial. Time-related factors are due to natural aging that leads to a need for more time to engage in sexual activities. 1) Delay in arousal, with greater need for genital stimulation. 2) Reduced penile rigidity and vaginal lubrication. 3) Loss of the sensation of ejaculatory inevitability 4) Increased anorgasmia. Medical factors increase with age included: 1) Drugs which can cause impotence or lack of libido. 2) Disease (such as diabetes mellitus) which lead to impotence. 3) Surgery of the prostate or uterus. 4) Physical barriers (such as catheters or pessaries). 5) Poor mobility due to arthritis or stroke. 6) Changes of body image (after mastectomy or limb amputation. 7) Depression, leading to loss of interest in sex. And then Psychosocial Factors that are linked to the process of ageing include: 1) Having no partner. 2) A lack of privacy. 3) Social conditioning.

Sexual activity in old age was thought to be immoral and non-existent by the church in past centuries and our attitudes have not truly changed that much. In our society sex and

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desire are believed to belong to the young and not the old and unfortunately many elderly also hold this belief. However, recent studies show some hope for change in this attitude as older Americans report that their sexual expression is a positive aspect of their lives. A lack of understanding from health care professionals may compel the elderly to conform to society's expectations, more so for older women. Thus, the promotion of healthy sexuality among the elderly is a challenge for health professionals. In addition, sex was rated as a moderately important need. Sexual interest was higher in male subjects. It's reported that sexual interest is higher among men than women from about age 35 onward.

In conclusion, in later life the expression of sexual and affectionate needs and desires is purposeful behavior in its own right through communication, pleasure and shared intimacy.