

# The Sunday Telegraph **Features**

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## Meet the 'Young-Old' generation who are refusing to act their age

A new swathe of the older population making the most of their 'extra time' are a lesson to us all

By Camilla Cavendish



### **Generation game: growing numbers aged 60 and over refuse to 'act their age'**

Credit: Peter Augustin/Getty Images

Last year, a Dutchman went to court to make himself 20 years younger. Emile Ratelband, now 70, said his age was stopping him getting dates online, because women did not realise that he had the body of a 40-something. He wasn't getting enough work, he argued, because of age prejudice. He told the court he wanted to become 49, which better reflected his emotional state.

The judges rejected his plea, ruling that to change his birth certificate would wreak havoc with legal rights. But this seemingly narcissistic case illustrates something important: we need to drastically update our view of what it means to be “old”.

“Why have a label?” says widow Andrea Hargreaves, 71, who has set up home with two other women her age in Sussex and started an arts festival. “We are the first generation to be able to style ourselves young, and we can believe it.”

In researching my book, *Extra Time*, I’ve interviewed people all over the world who are refusing to act their age. I’ve met sixtysomethings starting businesses, seventysomethings changing careers, and eighty-somethings who can run and cycle further than I can. More and more Brits are “unretiring” and going back to work, sometimes years after the official office send-off. These people are part of a growing group who don’t see themselves as old, don’t act old and won’t buy products marketed at the old. It’s only our expectations, and institutions, that need to catch up.

This new stage of life is called “Young-Old” by the Japanese, who are the world’s longest-living society. More of its citizens will hit 100 than anywhere else. The islands of Okinawa, in particular, have so many centenarians that they are often called the “land of the immortals”.

Japanese gerontologists define “Young-Old” as those aged 60 to 75, or later. Healthwise, they say, the Young-Old are completely different from 30 years ago, and they distinguish this group from the “Old-Old” – the frail elderly who need compassionate care.

**So what lessons can we learn from them, and how can we make the most of our own “extra time”?**

For starters, we need to invest in our health, plan longer careers and be far more optimistic about what life can hold. We need to stop portraying dementia as inevitable (in the UK, it has fallen by a fifth over the past 20 years) and utilise research that shows how our brain cells continue to develop throughout our lives. We need to knit the generations back together and recruit older people to help tackle some of society's most urgent tasks: whether conserving nature or helping man the NHS.

The happiest, most vibrant older people I have met have a strong sense of purpose. In Okinawa, where there is a much lower incidence of stroke and dementia than in the West, they talk about “ikigai”, which translates as “reason for being”. Ikigai is the guiding philosophy of Japan's Silver Centres, which find part-time work for the Young-Old.



Young as you feel: from left, Madonna, 60, Elle Macpherson, 55, and Carine Roitfeld, 64  
Credit: Getty Images; Wireimage

“It gives me a bright mind,” says 98-year-old Shuize Ohata, the oldest of a group of wizened ladies at the Edogawa Silver Centre, Tokyo. The women are sitting around a table, wearing flowery aprons they sewed themselves and tying gold ribbons round parcels. It’s a fiddly business, which saves the local factory time. The Silver Centres are a blend of work and coffee mornings: tea parties with purpose. “Ninety-three per cent of our members are very healthy,” Edogawa’s director told me. “We believe that our system helps keep them that way.”

We may need to change the type of job we do as we grow older, but many of us will need to keep going, earning and developing – or want to. Without work, things can go wrong.

“I married him for life, not for lunch,” as the tongue-in-cheek expression goes, when pensioned-off husbands take over the house. Nobuo Kurokawa, a psychiatrist, says Japanese women are suffering physical symptoms from the stress of “retired husband syndrome”. Silver divorce is soaring, partly as a consequence of couples having too much time to stare at one another.

When David Lloyd George established the state pension in 1908, he set the retirement age at 70. Few people lived that long. Today, the pension age is lower and many retire earlier. If current trends continue, some of us could spend a quarter of our lives in retirement. That’s crazy, for those (though sadly not all) who will be healthier than any previous generation.

Many employers are reluctant to hire or train people over 50, assuming that they are dull plodders. But experiments have suggested that’s not true. When BMW put skilled workers over 50 on to one of its production lines and provided working aids such as better lighting and protection from static electricity, the results were astonishing. The older team worked faster than the younger one it had replaced. Productivity grew by seven per cent. Absenteeism dropped from seven per cent to two per cent, below the factory average. The number of assembly defects fell to zero.

## **‘Why have a label? We are the first generation able to style ourselves young’**

BMW and other car companies are now giving workers exoskeleton suits – metal frames with motorised muscles – which help them lift objects, and reduce injury. Such inventions are revolutionising our ability to sustain physical tasks. But the BMW story is not just about technology: it’s also about belonging. I think the Young-Old employees worked more efficiently partly because they felt like a vital part of the company’s future, rather than people on their way out.

Some companies are now waking up to the fact that the retirement of baby boomers has created a skills shortage. They need older workers to fill the gaps and want employees who look more like their ageing customers.

Barclays, Boots, the Co-op and Aviva have all pledged to increase the number of over-50s in their workforces by 12 cent by 2022, and to publish data on their progress.

And with one in five over-50s now caring for an elderly relative, Aviva also offers carers generous paid and unpaid leave. “You wouldn’t hear a business saying to a pregnant woman, ‘you can have the day off to have the baby, but you need to be at work the day before and the day after’,” says Andy Briggs, who stepped down last week as the head of Aviva UK Insurance. “This is the same.”

Experience can often seem to count for little in a world where Mark Zuckerberg has proclaimed that “young people are just smarter”. Yet studies of mixed-age teams suggest that older heads can bring calm and patience to balance youthful dynamism. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger was 58 when he safely landed US Airways Flight 1549 in New York’s Hudson river, after both its engines were knocked out by a flock of geese.

“One way of looking at this,” he said afterwards, “might be that for 42 years, I’ve been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience, education and training. And on January 15 [2009], the balance was sufficient that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

If we are to fully embrace extra time, we will need to revolutionise our attitudes towards health. One group of Americans who took up jogging when it became a craze in the Seventies and continued to do regular exercise for 50 years, were found to be 30 years younger biologically than their chronological age. Almost every scientist I’ve interviewed takes exercise seriously, and is careful about what they eat. Some are working on anti-ageing compounds, which will come to market soon.

These won’t let us off the hook of eating right and exercising – and they won’t abolish bad luck – but they will, I believe, make more of us younger for longer.

So instead of going to court to change the number on our birth certificates, let’s change our notion of “old” to Young-Old. You may be younger than you think.

**Extra Time:** 10 Lessons for an Ageing World, by Camilla Cavendish, is published by Harper Collins, RRP £20. Buy now for £16.99 at [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk) or call 0844 871 1514