

# [How to grow old](https://assignbuster.com/how-to-grow-old/)

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How to Grow Old Bertrand Russell In spite of the titleï¼Œthis article will really be on how not to grow oldï¼Œwhichï¼Œat my time of lifeï¼Œis a much more important subjectï¼ŽMy first advice would be to choose your ancestors carefullyï¼ŽAlthough both my parents died youngï¼ŒI have done well in this respect as regards my other ancestorsï¼Ž My maternal grandfatherï¼Œit is trueï¼Œwas cut off in the flower of his youth at the age of sixty-sevenï¼Œbut my other three grandparents all lived to be over eightyï¼ŽOf remoter ancestors I can only discover one who did not live to a great age, and he died of a disease which is now rareï¼Œnamelyï¼Œhaving his head cut offï¼ŽA great-grandmother of mineï¼Œwho was a friend of Gibbonï¼Œlived to the age of ninety-twoï¼Œand to her last day remained a terror to all her descendantsï¼ŽMy maternal grandmotherï¼Œafter having nine children who survived, one who died in infancy, and many miscarriageï¼Œas soon as she became a widow devoted herself to women’s higher educationï¼ŽShe was one of the founders of Girton Collegeï¼Œand worked hard at opening the medical profession to womenï¼ŽShe used to relate how she met in Italy an elderly gentleman who was looking very sadï¼ŽShe inquired the cause of his melancholy and he said that he had just parted from his two grandchildren.“ Good gracious, " she exclaimed, “ I have seventy-two grandchild, and if I were sad each time I parted from one of them, I should have a dismal existence! " “ Madre snaturale, " he repliedï¼ŽBut speaking as one of the seventy-twoï¼ŒI prefer her recipeï¼ŽAfter the age of eighty she found she had some difficulty in getting to sleepï¼Œso she habitually spent the hours from midnight to 3 aï¼Žmï¼Žin reading popular scienceï¼ŽI do not believe that she ever had time to notice that she was growing oldï¼ŽThisï¼ŒI thinkï¼Œis the proper recipe for remaining youngï¼ŽIf you have wide and keen interests and activities in which you can still be effectiveï¼Œyou will have no reason to think about the merely statistical fact of the number of years you have already livedï¼Œstill less of the probable brevity of your futureï¼Ž As regards health, I have nothing useful to say since I have little experience of illnessï¼ŽI eat and drink whatever I likeï¼Œand sleep when I cannot keep awakeï¼ŽI never do anything whatever on the ground that it is good for healthï¼Œthough in actual fact the things I like doing are mostly wholesomeï¼Ž Psychologically there are two dangers to be guarded against in old ageï¼ŽOne of these is undue absorption in the pastï¼ŽIt does not do to live in memoriesï¼Œin regrets for the good old daysï¼Œor in sadness about friends who are deadï¼ŽOne’s thoughts must be directed to the futureï¼Œand to things about which there is something to be doneï¼ŽThis is not always easyï¼›one’s own past is a gradually increasing weightï¼ŽIt is easy to think to oneself that one’s emotions used to be more vivid than they areï¼Œand one’s mind more keenï¼ŽIf this is true it should be forgottenï¼Œand if it is forgotten it will probably not be trueï¼Ž The other thing to be avoided is clinging to youth in the hope of sucking vigor from its vitalityï¼ŽWhen your children are grown up they want to live their own livesï¼Œand if you continue to be as interested in them as you were when they were youngï¼Œyou are likely to become a burden to themï¼Œunless they are unusually callousï¼ŽI do not mean that one should be without interest in themï¼Œbut one’s interest should be contemplative andï¼ŒIf possibleï¼Œphilanthropicï¼Œbut not unduly emotionalï¼ŽAnimals become indifferent to their young as soon as their young can look after themselvesï¼Œbut human beingsï¼Œowing to the length of infancyï¼Œfind this difficultï¼Ž I think that a successful old age is easiest for those who have strong impersonal interests involving appropriate activities. It is in this sphere that long experience is really fruitful, and it is in this sphere that the wisdom born of experience can be exercised without being oppressive. It is no use telling grown-up children not to make mistakes, both because they will not believe you, and because mistakes are an essential part of education. But if you are one of those who are incapable of impersonal interests, you may find that your life will be empty unless you concern yourself with your children and grandchildren. In that case you must realize that while you can still render them material service, such as making them all allowance or knitting them jumpers, you must not expect that they will enjoy your company. Some old people are oppressed by the fear of death. In the young there is a justification for this feeling. Young men who have reason to fear that they will be killed in battle may justifiably feel bitter in the thought that they have been cheated of the best things that life has to offer. But in an old man who has known human joys and sorrows, and has achieved whatever work it was in him to do, the fear of death is somewhat abject and ignoble. The best way to overcome it -- so at least it seems to me -- is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river -- small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man who, in old age, can see his life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things he cares for will continue. And if, with the decay of vitality, weariness increases, the thought of rest will be not unwelcome. I should wish to die while still at work, knowing that others will carry on what I can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done. (from Portraits from Memory and Other Essays)