

# History of our fear of aging philosophy essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Abstract**

The fear of aging and death in America has grown into quite the headache. People today seem more concerned with their physical appearance and age than they are with their physical or mental health. Not only is this a factor, but the media, as well as the commercial sales industry, are taking advantage of this fear and using it to their advantage. This fear grips people for many reasons, but the 2 biggest are: 1.) they are afraid of the unknown, and 2.) they are afraid of being alone.

## **America's Fear of Aging**

**Many people today are convinced that if they can just lift one more weight or just run one more mile, they will never get old. Even if they don't give in and end up getting cosmetic surgery or spend too much money on expensive anti-aging creams that don't work, there comes a day when it's too much effort any longer to keep up the fantasy. What began with simply trying to look pretty has become a never-ending battle to be or to find the next fountain of youth in America. If someone has age spots, there's a cream for that. If you have stretch marks or cellulite, there's a salve or lotion for that. Dark circles under your eyes? There's a tonic for that as well. Give it time and Apple will develop an app for all your cosmetic woes!**

Fears and concerns about growing old are being addressed by those who are growing old. They aren't content to sit idly by and let death come swooping in on them. Instead they have become more proactive in the fight against the clock (e. g. participating in more physical activities, sharpening their

mental abilities via games, puzzles, being more socially interactive with others, etc.).

### Our Fear of Aging

Americans today are in a constant push to keep up with trends. Buy this new car, try this kind of new weight loss shake, etc. Not only do they push you to buy their product, they also bombard you with reasons why their product is so much better than their “ Brand X” competitor. The biggest culprits: The Cosmetic Industry. The message being broadcast by the cosmetic industry is “ if there’s something you that you don’t like, we’ll fix it.” Bayer (2004) said that from 1997 to 2001, cosmetic procedures increased 311% for women and 256% for men (p. 9). But why are we so afraid of being perceived as old?

I have a “ rule” that I can apply to practically anything in life: “ Everything is just a matter of perception.” much like the dichotomy between good and evil. In a standard story or movie, the “ good guy” perceives his actions as being in the good, but the “ bad guy” also sees his actions to be in the good. And each perceives the others actions to be bad. But how they are perceived is determined not only by them, but by outside sources as well (e. g. the readers of the story, the viewers of the movie, etc.). In America, people are more concerned with the perceptions of others rather than of their own.

But since when have we let the views of others govern our self-esteem?

Growing old shouldn’t be viewed as such a bad thing. In some cultures, being old is viewed in an opposite light. There are cultures in which aging is welcomed, as age signifies wisdom. This is usually accompanied by deep respect, honor, and reverence, which ensures that the elderly are well cared

for by family members. This is the goal of people in these cultures; to live long enough to get to this place where they can be revered by the younger people for their knowledge and wisdom.

In today's society, old people are laughed at and scoffed at by younger people. Old people have become a punch-line for numerous jokes and stereotypes. Rarely are they looked up to for their wisdom; they aren't respected for what they've done in their lives to be able to have the wisdom and knowledge that they do. Younger people laugh at them because they are afraid of getting old just like them, as well as being afraid of looking as old as them. But what drives this fear?

The answer is simple: when we get old, we are afraid that we are more than likely going to end up being alone. As we age, our physical appearance drastically changes. Our hair loses its color, our skin loses elasticity which results in wrinkles, we get liver spots, and the list goes on. It's all centered around how we look, and most people think if they look old, no one will want to be with them. Maybe people are afraid of the inner physical changes that take place. As people age their bodies become more worn out, especially if they haven't been very physically active or their diet hasn't been the best in the world. And what else accompanies all these aches and pains?

Medications that have a dozen or more side-effects, numerous trips to the doctor for this and that ailment, which it-turn gets you MORE medications.

Mark Twain once said " Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach 18" (Drye, 2011.) In other words, we worry about losing our looks, our vitality, our strength, or our

sexual energies. If what Mark Twain said were made into reality, we would instead be constantly looking forward to gaining these instead of losing them. The years between eighteen and twenty five are considered to be the best years of anyone's life. During these years of early adulthood, humans are the strongest physically and sexually than they will be any other time in their life, and reliving those memories only reminds people of this joy (Berger, 2011.)

### Our Fear of Death

Even worse than fearing growing old is fearing what is almost always associated with growing old: death. A theory by Dr. Sigmund Freud states that people's fear of death was more of a disguise for some other hidden concern (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, 2011.) Dr. Freud claimed that the unconscious cannot deal with the passing of time and the concept of life ended cannot register in our brain. With the mind being unable to register our own death, Dr. Freud theorized that everyone is convinced he or she is immortal (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, 2011.)

But what about what happens when we die? Nobody truly knows what will happen or where we will end up, and this stirs people's fear of the unknown. Will we end up in total annihilation (no afterlife, just non-existence), will we be reincarnated and if so what will we be, or will we go to heaven or hell? No one can really know until death happens to them, and by then it's too late. People have always feared the unknown, which has been a severe detriment to humanity throughout history. This has also motivated them to look for answers to whatever it is that they don't know.

In 1973, Ernest Beck theorized that the fear of death is real. Not only is the fear real, but it is so intense that the fear of death is the reason for all phobias that exist. Beck noted that people only function day to day because they are able to temporarily deny death. (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, 2011.) Beck has a very good point, though, because practically all phobias involve death. Someone with Arachnophobia is more than likely afraid that a spider will bite them and they'll die. Someone with Hydrophobia may be afraid of dying from drowning. And someone with Kinemortophobia, even though they have probably watched way too many horror movies/ TV shows, is still afraid of dying at the mercy of a zombie attack. It all comes back to being afraid of death.

But no matter which fear someone happens to fear the most, there's one thing that will always remain true: aging and death are inevitable. There's nothing anyone can do to avoid them and there's nothing that can be done to stop or even slow the progression of either one. So you could ask yourself, "If aging and death are going to happen whether I like it or not, should I be afraid all the time?" Therapists usually tell people with major phobia issues that in order to conquer their fears, they must first face them. Facing this kind of fear would probably involve more understanding of the reality of the situation than anything else.

Conclusion

**William Alexander Stiling once said “ Of all things that are feared, the last is death (Lockyer, 1969, p. 209.)” Aging and death are both facts of life, and there’s nothing we can do about it. Changing your appearance in an attempt to look younger may help you hold on to your self-perception of youthfulness, but it won’t have any effect on biological progression. The best therapy for this would be to just accept that aging and death will happen. Don’t try to fight it; don’t try to hide from it. Embrace the fact that they’re inevitable and prepare yourself mentally, spiritually, and physically.**