

‘A Better Life: old age, new thoughts’

Old age is not about 'them', it's about all of us. We're all heading in that direction - more of us than ever are reaching old age, and those who do face new challenges.

Yes, we're all growing older – but how often do we stop and reflect on what it means? What will be important to *you* when *you* are old – and will anyone be listening?

With the launch of our new website ‘A Better Life: old age, new thoughts’ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/betterlife>, JRF is challenging all of us - including ourselves - to think very differently about growing old. We rarely hear about this stage of life from the *real experts* – we can begin by listening to those amongst us who have the experience. This site gives older people's voices and perspectives a platform, and through this we hope to highlight their experiences, resilience and ability to flourish across a century of huge change. And we want to find out what they can teach us about mutual support and positive thinking.

This new digital platform offers us glimpses of people's lived experiences mostly through their own images and words. Some of the vignettes link to five papers which we commissioned from diverse groups of older people, many with high support needs. These include older people with learning difficulties, lesbian and gay people, South Asian elders, Gypsies and travellers, and dementia activists. Each group has explored what growing older really means – and what's important to them. Their personal stories have inspired a poem by Sir Andrew Motion – and the website also showcases a project by Magnum photographer Chris Steele-Perkins, providing a glimpse into what it's like to be a centenarian. Alongside these stories and images, a team from The Open University has investigated [what older people with high support needs want and value](#).

This project has been inspired by, and complements, the research evidence we are building up through our programme '[A Better Life](#)'. However, we have chosen an artistic approach to reach people through their emotions and appeal to their capacity for empathy. The website does not make direct recommendations about health and social care policy or practice, nor does it aim to offer practical support or information.

How do we hope the website will engage or affect you? Above all, we want to engage your emotions: you may *feel* intrigued, worried, inspired, ambivalent, relieved, happy, or a mix of these. The main thing is that you begin to empathise... and feel that it concerns you too, not only others. We want you to *think* of older people (past and present) in your personal and professional life, but also of yourself and your future. To think of growing old as a natural part of life, not only a time of loss, decline and dependency but a time that holds enjoyment and opportunities too. We want you to stop and think before talking jokingly about people 'being past it' or 'losing their marbles'. To listen to older people in your life more carefully, to treat them with respect, as your equals. To dare to look ahead to your own old age, and begin to consider how your life may change... and plan.

Overall, we want society to take a broader perspective which recognises that growing old is a natural stage along the journey of life that almost all of us will

experience. We want to respect people's uniqueness as individuals with whole lives, not just as patients or consumers of care. And we want to see older age as a chance for new opportunities, relationships and aspirations.

The central message is that, whatever our age and however much support we need, we can all live meaningful lives based on strong personal relationships. We can all go on giving as well as taking. Right up until the end of our lives, both our present selves and our histories are worth understanding and celebrating.

Do visit the new website – and let us know what you think via the comment buttons on the website – or by the Facebook and Twitter links.