

Aging is Happier, More Productive, and More Complicated Than We Think

A white paper summarizing our study of older adults' experiences, retirement goals, and social communities throughout the transition ages of 60-65

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Aging is a loaded topic. We're [living longer and doing more](#) with our time than ever before. Yet for many aging remains an uncomfortable and often depressing conversation. [AARP estimates that after age 45](#), two out of three adults experiences age discrimination. In addition, older adults are at an increased risk for [financial fraud](#), which is one of the many facets of [elder abuse](#). In recent decades, the story of aging has been defined by disappearance: people hit their sixties, wind down, get a gold watch, and retire to Florida to fade into generational obscurity.

The reality of aging and retirement is more diverse, more complex, and more hopeful than initial forays would suggest. Older adults represent a growing sector of the population—a percentage [projected to double by 2050](#), by which time 25-29% of the US population are expected to be 60+, while the global population is expected to reach [over 2 billion](#). And older adults are [increasingly determined to stay connected and live well](#). It's a vital time to understand how adults transition into productive well-being in later life stages, and how businesses and organizations can service this increasing demographic.

Understanding this group will take greater nuance in our multicultural, global world: socioeconomic disparities, climate change futures, and technological innovations at work will all have different effects on groups as they age. There are significant challenges for making a youth-focused world ready for older adults; for instance, an overwhelming [majority of older adults prefer to "age-in-place,"](#) but transportation infrastructure lags far behind the needs of non-drivers.

We wanted to learn more about the experiences of this diverse, growing population of older adults: how they think about retirement, how they plan to engage in their future, and how they see themselves.

Conversations about aging are often dominated by two extremes; either a stereotypical focus on negative decline, or a rose-colored-glasses view of retirement that's increasingly only attainable for a privileged few. We wanted to avoid these extremes. Instead, we went into this project motivated by an **optimism for the potential of older adults** and **the desire to listen to authentic stories** of aging, loss, and learning. In a partnership between McClennan Group and Tetra insights, we designed an exploratory research project, focusing especially on the transition ages of 60-65.

Key Highlights: We discovered that older adults' trajectories are not as linear as our stereotypes about retirement assume, and that this population is keenly interested in their well-being. A majority of older adults in our study are happy, creatively engaged, and balance connection to community with building lasting legacies. We also find a great deal of complexity: older adults have deep financial concerns, face ageism, and grapple with everything from starting new businesses to rising health costs. Below, we outline some of the findings from this broad, exploratory look at older adults.

This Project

We surveyed 1,141 people from ages 18 through 90, using a blend of validated research scales such as the Negative and Positive Affect Scale, our own quantitative measures, and original open-ended questions where participants could elaborate on answers about retirement planning, goals, and attitudes about the future. We then supplemented this quantitative work with eight in-depth qualitative interviews, spending an hour with each participant hand-selected from our quantitative survey to provide a rich, descriptive window into their experience. We focused on sampling from a diverse range of participants (Table 1), as we were especially interested in representing the voices of older adults in varied income, demographic, and lifestyle groups.

1,141 Participants

787 were female, 343 were male,
11 were nonbinary or preferred not to answer

Mean age was 42, the age range was 18-96,
211 were 60+

Participants were from all 50 states, highest representations
were NY, Washington DC, CA, and VA

Income ranged from under 40,000 to 300,000+
46% were low-income, 23% were mid-income, and 31% were
high-income

49% were married

52% had children

In self-reported identification, 63% were White/Caucasian,
15% were Black/African American, 8% were Asian
American, 6.4% were Hispanic/Latino

Of participants who were 59+, 58% were retired

Table 1: Survey Demographics

Overall, these participants told stereotype-defying stories about transition and thriving, positioning themselves as the active centers of their own lives. Older adults are **happier** on average than younger adults, feel just as **productive** as younger adults, and have big goals for giving back to the community around them. Far from the stereotypes of becoming increasingly lonely as we age, we found that most of our participants reported a **strong social community** and heard stories about creative, inventive ways that older adults nurture community. In fact, “community” was significantly more likely to be a top concern for people in their twenties compared to people in their sixties.

While the challenges older adults face are many and varied, there were discernible patterns. We found that most career paths are more circuitous than a traditional sketch of retirement imagines. We heard about worries concerning savings, entrepreneurship explorations, and trying to stay in touch with far-away family. As we expected, financial pressures were particularly critical for older adults, and **concerns over health infrastructure** emerged as particularly resonant, even across income groups. Most older adults were worried about their financial futures, and many felt that their age limited others’ perceptions of their abilities. But even here, there was disparity, and many older adults were resilient and exploratory. Some people in their 60s were planning on a fairly secure retirement while others were starting new businesses.

Quantitative: The Top Survey Themes

Older adults are happier on average than younger adults, and nearly as curious. We asked participants to rank the frequency of their negative and positive daily emotions using the [Negative and Positive Affect scale](#). Intriguingly, this measure of daily emotional experience became more positive for older participants, who were more likely to report feeling emotions such as calm, optimistic, cheerful, or full of life, and less likely to report feeling emotions such as hopeless, restless, nervous, or very sad (figure 1). And our finding here is commensurate with [previous research findings](#), which have discovered that mental health and overall happiness can substantially improve for older adults compared to adults in their twenties.

We further asked participants about their comfort and openness with uncertainty using a scale called the [Curiosity and Exploration Inventory](#) (figure 2). Here, we were surprised to find that while scores on this scale decreased by age, this effect was only truly salient for older adults in their 80s. It's possible that this decrease for adults in their 80s is driven by risk aversion in the context of more fragile health. But comparing adults in their 60s and 70s to younger generations, we still see an overall positive measure for older adults' exploration, curiosity, and openness to new experiences.

Positive Daily Affect by Age Group

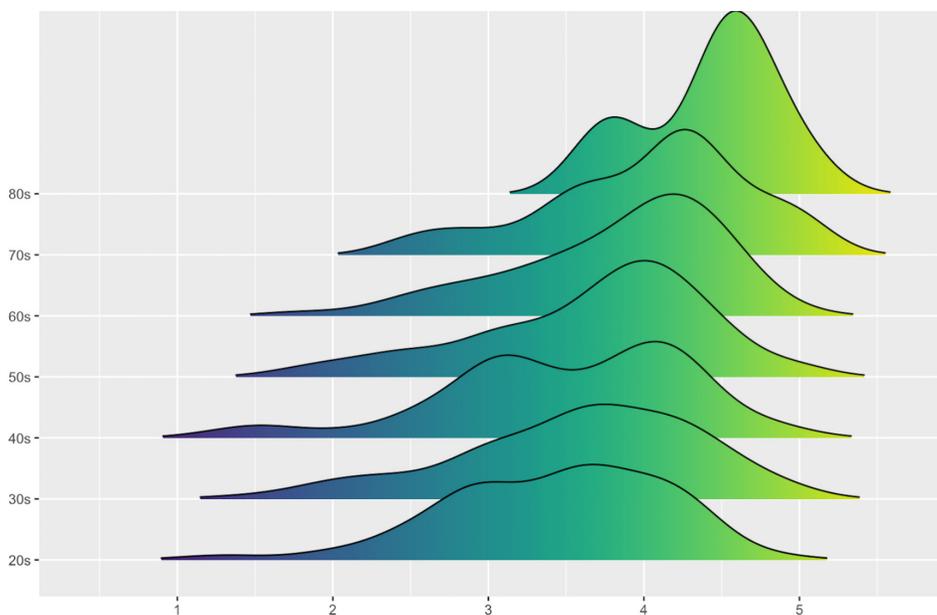


Figure 1: Older adults report happier daily emotions on average compared to younger adults

Positive Daily Affect by Age Group

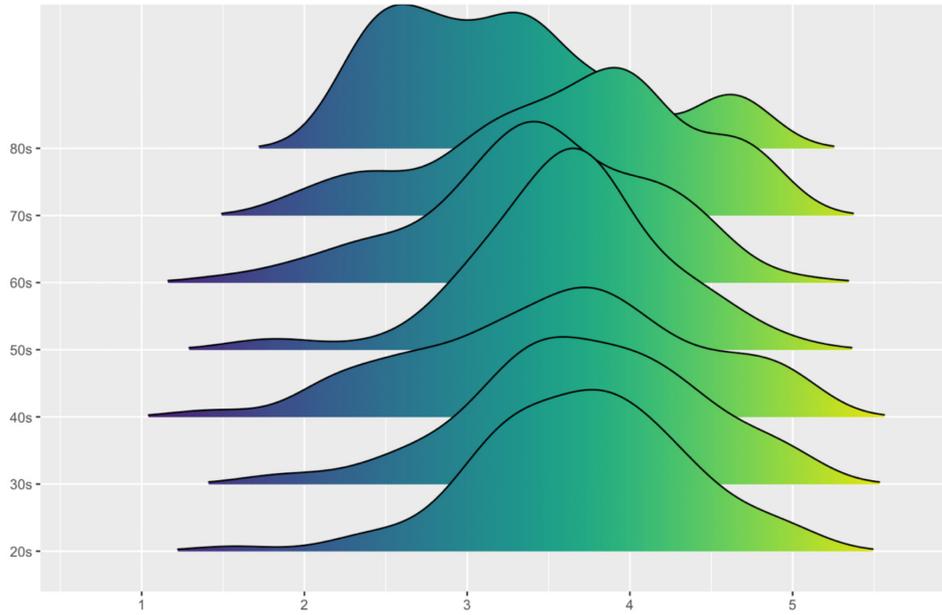


Figure 2: Older adults show comparable curiosity scores until their 80s

Older adults feel financial insecurity and ambiguity about retirement. Only about 50% of our respondents who were 60+ agreed with the statement “I feel secure and certain about my financial future” (Figure 3). Interestingly, however, this did not mean that they estimated their challenges as significantly more intense than younger generations: young people and older adults were equally likely to agree with the statement, “I have many challenges in this time of life.” It could be that that older adults’ increased resiliency helps to explain this perspective. While financial insecurity is a feature for this group, older adults remained optimistic and committed to their own productivity. A majority of older adults on our survey expected to keep volunteering or mentoring in their career area even after retirement, and adults in their sixties rated their own productivity as highly as adults in their twenties and thirties. However, only about half of older adults agreed that they had “plans or goals for retirement.”

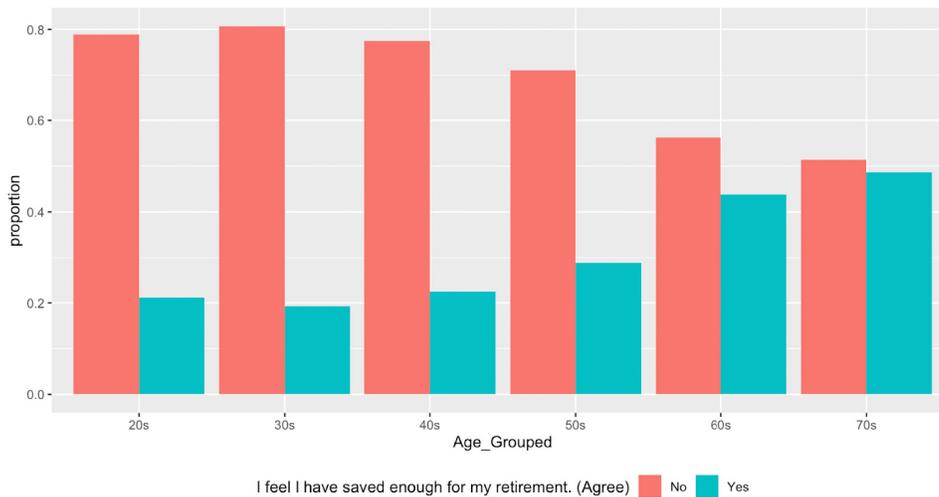


Figure 3: Certainty in savings increases with each decade, but does not exceed 50% for older adults on our survey

Only 9% of the older adults on our survey said that they had difficulty finding community in day-to-day life.

Older adults are fostering strong communities overall, but the ways that individuals reach out for community can provide clues to isolation. One of the scales we measured on our survey was the [Need to Belong](#) measure. We were curious whether older adults would show a stronger response on this scale compared to younger adults, potentially serving as a signal that lonelier older adults have a more intensive

need for social relationships. Interestingly, older adults showed a lower score on this scale compared to younger adults (Figure 4). Many of our participants in the later interviews shed light on these responses, giving evidence for strong social circles and deep ties. And in open-ended responses, participants shared many examples of strong connections in church groups, with work colleagues, and in their families. Participants with and without children described deep involvement with family and communities. This theme is reminiscent of recent work from Harvard finding that [social community and healthy relationships are be a key piece in a happier, healthier old age](#). On the other hand, our qualitative interviews provided examples of some of the isolation experienced by older adults, as well as a window into the role that new technologies play in these patterns. In the sixties, increasing social gaps between generations and upheaval in work and communities can leave some older adults far from their previous community. For some of these older adults, voracious online activity in older adults may be a signal for an underlying loneliness and wellbeing challenge.

Need Belong Scale by Age Group

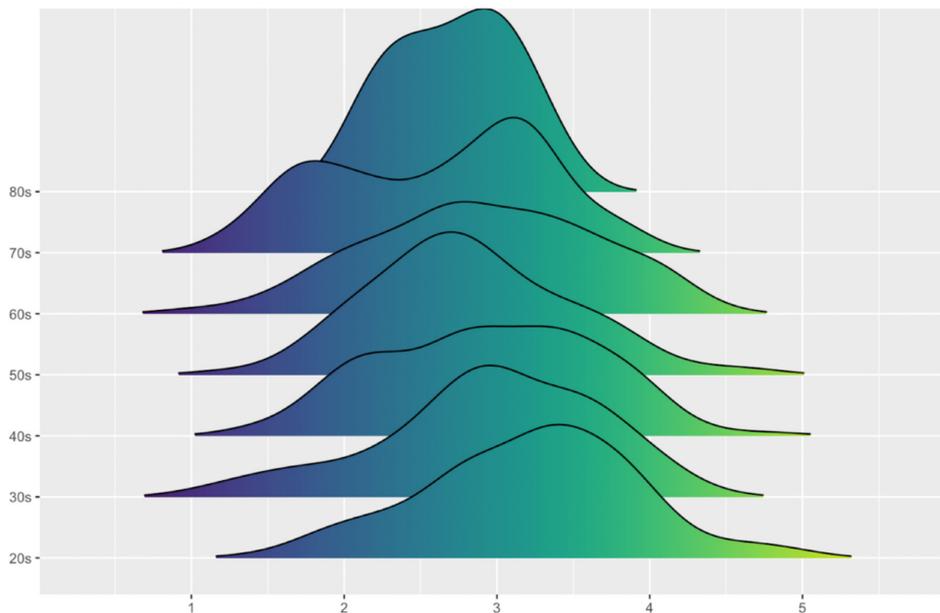


Figure 4: Older adults show decreased Need to Belong on average compared to younger adults

When we asked participants to rank emotional, social, health or financial concerns as their top concern, older adults' most consistent top response was health.

Health is key but so is resilience: motivation to maintain health and well-being is a key entry point into interventions for this age group.

For adults in their 60s, concerns with support systems appeared more pressing that concerns about individual needs, like health, which for many have not yet emerged. On our survey, some participants wrote that

their retirement plan had been disrupted by long-term layoffs, their own parents' experiences of dementia, or becoming a caretaker for a spouse or child (or both). Many participants expressed the desire to retire, but that they needed to maintain their career for the sake of health insurance. Many older adults were balancing a large skill set and an eagerness to work against increasing beliefs that they won't be understood by the workplace. However, some of our participants rewrote this narrative by finding new career paths or by diving into entrepreneurship—often by necessity. Participants cultivated **resilience** by investing in themselves.

Altogether, these findings present the sixties as a key moment for deciding on the health trajectory of the next few decades: in our qualitative interviews, the most health-motivated older adults reported watching their peers or older family members' health decline, and feeling both profound motivation and profound challenges in maintaining their health with this newly-present awareness. It is possible that this negative trigger can provide a positive entry point for older adults to engage with support systems that encourage healthy living. Many older adults discussed trying to learn more about nutrition and exercise on their own, and several expressed optimism in regards to having access to better medical care than previous generations and in new medical technology. That said, the prevailing attitude about health systems and insurance was suspicion and fear. The sixties present an important opportunity to create supportive systems for older adults before medical complexities emerge in later decades, and older adults' increasing awareness of the potential for decreasing health trajectories may be a key motivator for this engagement.

Qualitative: Stories from the Interviews

Some of the most meaningful findings in this study came after our quantitative survey, when we were able to spend significant time in conversation with eight older adults to hear more about their lives and experiences. These adults represented an interesting cross-section of experience (Table 2). The conversations were far- ranging and impactful: topics ranged from new business ventures, keeping up with friends, planning for retirement, and handling loss.

“Everything has to have meaning now.”

8 Interviews

5 were female, 3 were male
The age range was 60-68
Participants were from MD, KS, TX, PA, VA and FL
Income ranges were from under 40,000 to 150,000- 200,000

5 were married, 2 were divorced, 1 was single
In self-reported identification, 5 were White/Caucasian, 2 were Black/African American, 1 was Hispanic/Latino
4 agreed that they “felt secure” about their financial future, 4 did not

Table 2: Interview Demographics

A theme throughout the interviews was that time becomes more meaningful as older adults reflect on condensing and focusing on the most rewarding parts of their lives. Carol (68) was still running a nonprofit that she founded many years earlier but contemplated the need to close it as her energy declined. She noted that “few of us are now doing what we thought we would be doing when we were seventeen,” but saw this move into a new life stage as

hopeful, and transformative: “it’s time to be about me.” In this conversation, Carol reflected deeply on the nonlinearity of her career and goals, and the loss that comes with age which had brought her this perspective. Carol shared that after her own mother passed, she became the matriarch of her family and that this did not always leave room for her own identity. She sees time at this age as precious: “everything in my life has to have meaning now.” Carol’s story speaks to the **paradox of later ages, when loss and growth are found in equal measure.**

Positive Daily Affect by Age Group

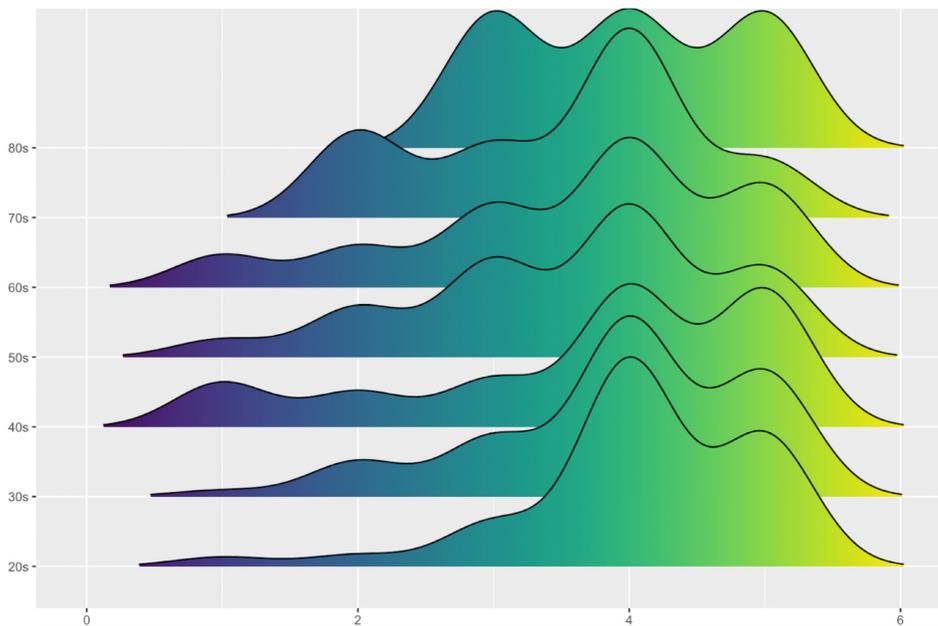


Figure 5: While there is some increase in clusters of negativity for older adults, their average positivity toward their next stage of life is equivalent with younger adults.

I feel very positive about the next stage of life. (Agree/Disagree)

“Finding the dream job at 60.”

Older adults feel productive: With age, there was no decrease in how strongly adults in our survey agreed that “I am a productive member of my community, and I give a lot to others.” And when we asked them whether they felt they had “achieved most of the major milestones I want to achieve,” only 8.5% disagreed.

The nonlinearity of retirement and the workforce potential of older adults was beautifully illustrated by one interview participant, Cindi (62). Cindi had already retired with her husband in a financially secure situation after a productive career, when an opportunity came up to pursue a job working in a high school. This opportunity was particularly poignant for Cindi, who had chosen against this career track many decades earlier and had always wondered what it would be like to explore it. Now she worked full-time in what she described as a dream job, feeling that this decade

was a moment for reinvention and new energy as she created a whole new career stage. Finding this career opportunity also felt like building a bridge and supporting her community. Cindi spoke of feeling like a mentor to the young students she worked with every day: “They trust me, and they listen to me. They say you don’t try to change our mind; you listen, you answer our questions.”

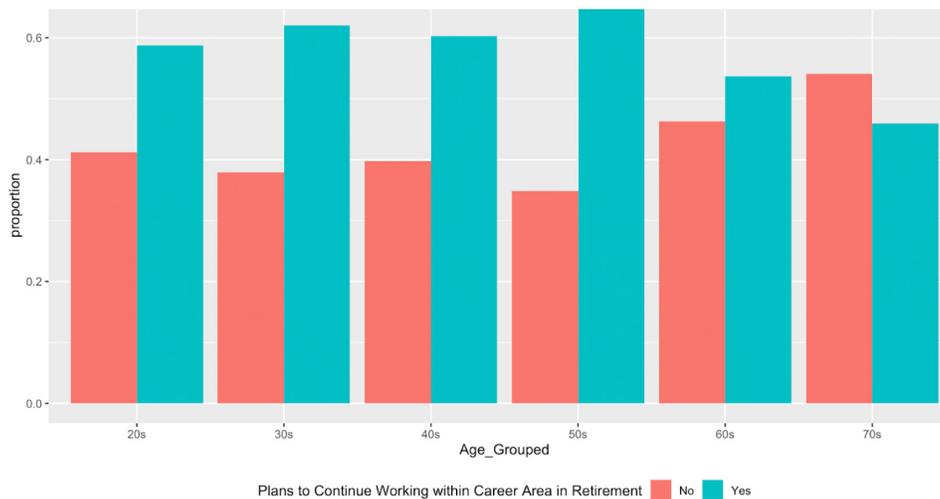


Figure 6: Many older adults plan to continue to work in their career area during retirement through volunteering, mentorship, and other outreach

“We fed off each other’s expertise.”

As we found on the larger survey, older adults draw upon and nurture their **community** and **social support**. In the interviews, we heard interesting examples of how older adults adeptly using social networks to enhance their impact at work. Luisa (67) spoke warmly about how cultivating a community of fellow co-workers in their sixties became a de facto **knowledge network**. Luisa partnered with similarly aged work colleagues to form a social group, where throughout the week, members would share skills, help with various tasks, and clue each other in to new technologies. On the other hand, George (65) spoke of the isolation of feeling age discrimination in a recent job search: “You would have a good interview, but then they go back and think, we’re not gonna hire an old guy.” This was a fear echoed by many of our participants, such as Luisa, Mike (60) and Sharon (68), who all spoke of not revealing their age when they could avoid it for fear of judgment and discrimination. George described a path to owning his own business and solopreneurship as the financial plan that made the most sense for achieving his desire for independence and freedom from age discrimination on the job market, something we would describe as **entrepreneurship by necessity**. These experiences highlighted the potential impact of age-inclusive workplaces for older adults who want to keep working.

“I need to keep moving.”

Change is constant: 66% of respondents at all ages on our survey agree that “my plans, goals, and strategies for the next decade are different from what they used to be,” and there was no difference in response to this question by age.

Investment in health matters in a new way for adults in their sixties.

This came through clearly in our interviews, where there was an overall consciousness that habits during this decade can impact the quality of life in later decades. Lawrence (61) shared about the feeling that his age brought a wake-up call, and that it set him on a journey of losing weight as an older man. Many of our participants were aware that paying attention to

their health was no longer optional and described their well-being routines as deeply functional, motivated by the desire to maintain their active mobility. The majority of our interviewees were energetic and investing in themselves.

Cindi (62) talked about diving into reading health science and exercise as a new phase for self-care. Sonja (62) shared her deep love for adventure: “I’ve been all over! Hiking, wine, and waterfalls, three of my favorite things!”

Despite a keen reflection on future health risks, the majority of our interviewees felt optimistic about their long-term activity and resilience. Where there was fear, it was mostly centered on sudden catastrophic change after watching aging parents, or the cost of medical care. Sonja (62) spoke about having firm retirement plans, which were now in question. Sonja said that “the number one [concern is] insurance,” and that her retirement planning depended on being able to have access to good medical care. Most agreed that this age held a sense of newfound respect for the fragility of health and the importance of being active.

What's next?

Over 1,141 survey respondents and hours of engaged conversation, we explored people’s perceptions of what it means to transition into older adulthood and how they think about their plans, goals, community, and resilience. Overall, the picture that emerges for the sixties is an energized decade of transition. Older adults are robust, interested, planning ahead but also mindful of increasing fragility.

We discovered that the decade of the sixties is a moment for reinvention, awareness, and excitement. Along with our positive findings, we noted the absence of protective mechanisms for these older adults’ lives. Many of older adults’ concerns arose around **systems for care** rather than their own abilities. They spoke about fears for the future of healthcare, the pressure to maintain insurance and other systems through employment, the difficulty of maintaining a savings trajectory for retirement, and an increasing awareness that their own mobility might limit their engagement in activities they love.

As our global society continues to age, it becomes more important than ever to understand older adults. In our research, we’ve found that older adults were motivated to work, serve as community members, give back to others, and were creative about the ways that they applied their hard-won wisdom. Yet we also heard stories of age discrimination and limited opportunities for these older adults to bring their full value to the table. When we hold onto negative stereotypes about aging, we fail to see the full potential of this life stage and remain mired in bias against this vital and increasing population. **The potential for meaningful aging** is changing for this generation of older adults, and our beliefs about age and capacity for listening, need to change along with it.