

## Can You Catch the “Old Disease”?

It's not uncommon to hear prospective residents of a CCRC say that they are hesitant to move to a retirement community because they are turned off by seeing residents with walkers and wheelchairs, or simply because they don't want to be around a bunch of “old people.”

### Lack of diversity vs. fear of aging

For some, what they may really be saying is that they prefer to live in an intergenerational environment, meaning, a community with people of all different ages. That's an understandable wish. Fortunately, even though by definition they are age-restricted, there are more and more CCRCs and other senior living communities that are developing intergenerational programs. These types of initiatives offer numerous benefits to both the seniors and the younger generations involved in them.

But for other seniors who say they don't want to live with other older people, one can't help but wonder if on some level, they are saying that they are worried about catching the “old disease.” Even those in their late 80s or 90s sometimes express this sentiment. Even if it is on a very subconscious level, it's as if they feel that if they're around people who have experienced physical decline as a result of a health condition or the natural aging process, they too will become older and frailer—like a highly contagious disease.

### An unchanged lifestyle

For seniors who voice concerns about living among “old people,” perhaps they've been fortunate enough to have lived a long and healthy life thus far by remaining active, eating well, and staying young-at-heart—and that is wonderful. But does that mean being around other older adults will stifle that? Not in my experience, having visited hundreds of CCRCs.

People who are active and have healthy habits when they relocate to a CCRC or other senior living community are likely going to remain that way. And CCRCs have a variety of ways to facilitate this active lifestyle among their residents. From fitness classes, swimming pools, and workout facilities, to healthy menu options created by trained dietitians; from social gatherings and cultural excursions, to affinity groups and organized activities—there are countless (but of course, optional) ways to stay physically active and mentally engaged when you live in a CCRC.

So, for those seniors who are opposed to living in a CCRC or other retirement community because they are worried about catching the “old disease,” isn't this, on some level, ageism among peers? Or does it speak to a more deep-seated fear and/or disdain of aging that is common among Americans?

### Contempt for growing old

A [2013 Pew Research Center survey](#) of more than 2,000 U.S. adults examined people's views of aging, medical advancements, and life extension. While modern medicine is helping people live longer lives, not everyone views this as a good thing. When survey respondents were asked how long they would like to live:

- Less than 10 percent of people were hoping to live to be 100 or older.
- 20 percent of respondents said they wanted to live into their 90s.
- 32 percent said they would like to live into their 80s.
- 30 percent of survey participants said they didn't want to make it past 80.

Interestingly, on the flipside, this survey also revealed that 41 percent of respondents believed that “having more elderly people in the population” is a *positive* for society.

The results of this survey are intriguing. Even though older people are viewed as a positive force within our country, nearly two-thirds of people in this survey didn’t want to live to be 90. This seems like a fascinating paradox.

### **What does it mean to be “old”?**

When looking at the results of the Pew survey, what I believe so many people are missing in this equation is that age truly is just a number. I’ve known people who are in their 50s and 60s who have the poor health and sedentary lifestyle you might expect in someone 30 years older. And conversely, I’ve known people in their 80s and 90s who are still as healthy and spry as someone three decades their junior.

For those who say that they don’t want to live in a CCRC because they don’t want to be around “old people”: You aren’t seeing the forest for the trees. CCRCs have so much to offer their residents — services and activities that can actually make it much easier for residents to maintain their healthy, active lifestyle, in addition to the availability of a continuum of care services if and when a resident needs them. Yes, some of the people who have lived in the CCRC for some time may require assistive devices — just as any one of us may as we grow older — but there are countless other residents within the community who are likely still living active, independent lives.

But here’s the big question: Can we as a society get to a place where a person, regardless of age or physical condition, is embraced as a valuable individual, both for who they are and what they’ve done in life? Can we focus not on age, but on what we can learn from these folks, and grow as individuals as a result of our shared experiences?