



To understand the special problems of elderly people, begin by pondering on what happens to us when we become older. Here are some ideas to stimulate your thoughts.

What Happens In Old Age?

- The body begins to fail. Illness is more likely to strike and ageing takes its toll on appearance, strength, endurance, range of movement and speed of reaction.
- The powers of the mind may begin to deteriorate, especially the memory, but remember this is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. Memory loss significantly affects less than 1 in 10 of those over 65. Nevertheless, many more fear dementia and the loss of dignity which often comes with it can be a major issue.
- Isolation becomes a common problem. Families move away, friends move to other places, or become ill, or die, and all at a time when it is no longer so easy to travel. Another consideration, and one that is often forgotten, is the fact that with increasing age the body requires less sleep, so that lonely hours of wakefulness may be added to the night.
- Loss of independence becomes a fear, if not a problem.
- Financial insecurity often causes concern.
- Loss of a sense of purpose and worth may lead to depression.
- The disappointments and failings of life may come more to awareness, and can sometimes pose temptation to become resentful and bitter.
- Death becomes more imminent and, as it does, lifelong defences crumble and fears come to the surface. Anxiety and sleeplessness may be the outcome.

What other common effects of ageing can you think of?

Coping With The Problems

Now that you have given some thought to what happens in old age you should be able to think about how you can help the elderly members of your church. Here are some of my ideas, but again I emphasise, as I have tried to do in all of these articles, it is your responsibility to give thought to how you can fulfil your obligations to your fellow believers. Take this list then, and add to it, keeping in mind the specific needs of those elderly people you know.

- Always maintain the dignity of the elderly. For example, do not use first names unless you are invited to do so, and never speak in condescending tones.
- Be aware of the possible limitations of an elderly mind and body. Speak up if he is deaf, but don't if he is not! Concentration span, memory and powers of endurance may be limited. Be careful that in your enthusiasm to help you do not exhaust. Sometimes it is wise to be less ambitious in setting goals for the elderly.
- When ill-health and infirmity arise encourage a sensible approach to seeking medical help, gently encouraging a right view of sickness in the light of Scripture.

- When the powers of the mind begin to deteriorate help to make the best of what memory remains by introducing memory aids, and maintaining familiar routines and surroundings as far as possible.
- When loneliness becomes an issue you may be able to give some practical advice on use of time, or introduce some purposeful activities or meaningful contacts with others. Take into account the duties of Christian families and the responsibilities of the whole church community, as well as your own personal responsibility to show Christian love. Especially remember the need to pass the long hours of the night and, if necessary, give help to consider realistically the question of where to live.
- When loss of independence is seen as failure encourage a look at God's plan for the church, pointing out that appropriate dependence upon others is good for the whole body of believers (1 Corinthians 12:14–27).
- Arrange whatever practical help that is needed: jobs to be done, meals to be provided, or transport to be offered.
- When finances are a concern arrange for informed advice and practical assistance.
- When there is loss of the sense of purpose and worth help to identify God's purpose.
- When the disappointments and failings of life come more to awareness draw attention to the cross of Christ.
- When there is temptation to resentment and bitterness look at the Biblical attitudes of forgiveness and love.
- When death becomes imminent and anxiety mounts, do not avoid the subject but encourage with thoughts of heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Encourage an honest look at guilt feelings if these should surface remembering that if there is real guilt we have, in the Lord, a ready remedy. It is never kind to cover over guilt lightly.



What meaningful roles exist for those who are elderly and infirm within your church?



How can we benefit more from the experience of those who are older?



In biblical thought, who is responsible to care for the elderly?

Preparing For Old Age

Before we leave the subject of old age, let me remind you that it is often possible to minimise the detrimental effects of problems and change by preparing in advance. It is important for us all to look forward to old age and do certain things which will make coping easier. Again, here are some suggestions which you could usefully apply.

- Remember your goal. Live life in anticipation of Heaven with the attitude which says, "To live is Christ, to die is gain." so that as the prospect of going there becomes more immanent you will have more cause to rejoice than to look back with regrets, or look forward with dread.
- Remember your purpose. Whatever his or her infirmity every elderly believer has a purpose. That purpose, as it has been throughout life, is to glorify God. However incapacitated you may become toward the end of your life you will still have opportunities to fulfil that purpose. Now, when you are younger, you can usefully look forward and prepare for a God glorifying old age, preparing to take up new directions, opportunities and challenges when they arise. In doing this it is helpful to bear in mind that Scripture identifies some qualities which should be particularly evident in the lives of the elderly. They are to receive respect, and should live in such a way as to encourage it in others (Leviticus 19:32, Proverbs 16:31). They are entrusted with wisdom and understanding which they are to pass on to younger generations (Job 12:12). They are to set an example of reverence, self-control and patience and pass on their skills to the young (Titus 2:2-4).
- Prepare for retirement. By all means anticipate changes in emphasis and direction before they are imposed and plan toward new avenues of Christian service, but do not neglect wise financial planning and anticipation of future needs for living accommodation. Remember that if moves have to be made it is easier to do so when fit and well than when forced by infirmity.
- Exercise godly living throughout life, being especially careful to maintain a tender heart which is sensitive to the Word of the Lord. Maintain steady progress in Christian knowledge and godliness, fully participating in church life and maintaining a lifelong sense of security, rest and contentment in the Lord.
- Develop your physical capabilities as much as possible, promoting good health by proper diet and regular exercise.
- Develop your mental faculties, exercising the memory and developing powers of concentration. Maintain a pure mind that is trained to think on those things which are worthy of a child of God (Philippians 4:8), so that should control of your thoughts become more difficult good habits, long established, will carry you along in peace of mind.



What do you need to do in preparation for old age?