

gerontology
A. Jolayne Farrell

'Senility' — the idea is outdated

Dear Jo:
Where did the myth — "old age brings feeble-mindedness" — come from?
Ms. E.L., Western Reader

Dear Ms. L.:
Apparently the myth began in the late 1800s when the noted psychologist George Beard reported his controversial findings on a study on how aging affected the mental faculties. The data that he and his colleagues collected was vague and unscientific.

Their findings that "70 percent of creative works had been achieved by age 45 and 80 percent by age 50" created quite a sensation in the press at that time.

Their conclusion — that as people grew older, their mental faculties deteriorated — has been totally discredited.

SOMEHOW, BEARD and his contemporary agelists managed to ignore the works of Goethe, who completed "Faust" when he was over 80; Humboldt, who presented his great contribution to science, "the Kosmos," when he was 78; and Michelangelo, whose major contributions to the world of art were completed in his 70s and 80s.

Since that time, no study has ever been reported to support or prove that Beard's theory had any value. Nevertheless, the myth persists.

The idea that aging brings feeble-mindedness is reinforced further by the fear that senility looms in everyone's future. The word "senility" has the same origin as the word "senate" — they both come from the Latin "senex," which simply means old.

The root of the word means wisdom and experience. Unfortunately, in recent years it has come to be associated with mental deterioration and decline. The word senility has been so badly abused that most gerontologists no longer use it.

CURRENT RESEARCH related that only 5 percent of people over the age of 65 show symptoms of mental impairment, and less than 10 percent exhibit mild to moderate memory loss.

Robin Marantz Henig, in his book, "The Myth of Senility," suggests a

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Cold is dangerous to body

Do you know how to protect yourself from winter illness and injury?
"The key to enjoying the winter season is to keep your body healthy. People must realize the special needs their bodies have during the winter months," said Paul Phelps, manager of Oakland County Emergency Medical Services and Disaster Control.

"Cold weather presents unique dangers that people should be aware of."

EMS/DISASTER Control offers these tips to help keep you healthy during the upcoming winter months:

- Don't neglect yourself. Eating and dressing properly can provide natural warmth. Well-balanced meals help the body produce its own heat. Several thin layers of clothing provide increased protection.
- Be sure you have adequate medical supplies for the long winter months ahead. Check with your doctor to see which medications might interfere with your body's temperature control and take your temperature regularly. On cold days, you might not be as warm as you think.
- If you must go outdoors and exert yourself in frigid weather, pace your activity. Staying active helps the body generate its own heat but overexertion can increase the risk of a heart attack or stroke.
- Since the body loses three-quarters of its heat through the head, wearing a wool hat can be essential to staying warm.
- Hypothermia, a dangerous drop in body temperature to below 95 degrees, is particularly threatening to older adults. A person can experience confusion, slurred speech, stiff muscles or uncontrollable shivering due to hypothermia. Hypothermia is sometimes fatal.

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