

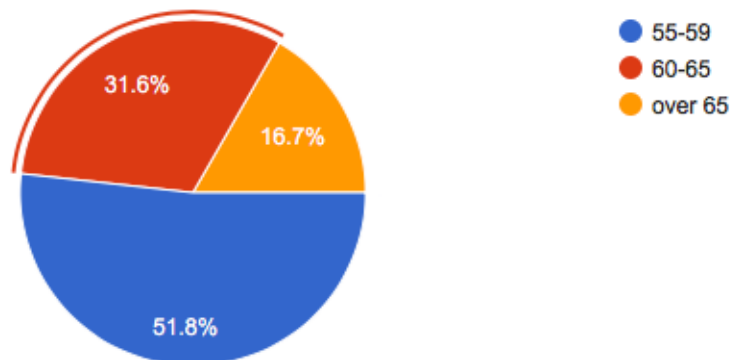


Impact of 60: a summary of the results

I am approaching my 60th birthday, and over the last couple of years I have noticed some distinct changes. Apart from the increased wrinkliness, I have noticed myself experiencing a sense of urgency and a desire to live whatever life I have left as well as possible. I am aware of an impending loss of friends who are in poor health and family members. I find myself more interested in faith and spirituality, and I have a sense that I am avoiding a number of less comfortable

1. How old are you right now?

114 responses



feelings. I have also noticed that many of my clients are in a similar age group, and addressing some very similar issues.

I decide to explore this with a short survey sent to friends who I thought were in the right age group (a risky business!) and to widen the group by posting on Facebook, and in particular a large Facebook group for counsellors, which brought in responses from many people who I didn't know. In total I received 115 responses, which was many more than I anticipated.

The age breakdown of those who responded was skewed towards those approaching 60, with about 52% in the 55-59 age bracket.

Of the group, 9% described themselves as male, and 91% as female, so that this snapshot is very much weighted towards a female perspective. In a trial run of the survey one person described themselves as non binary.

I was curious as to whether people regarded turning 60 as a milestone. Not surprisingly, about 80% did see it this way, given that this is a self selecting group of respondents. The reasons for this were interesting:

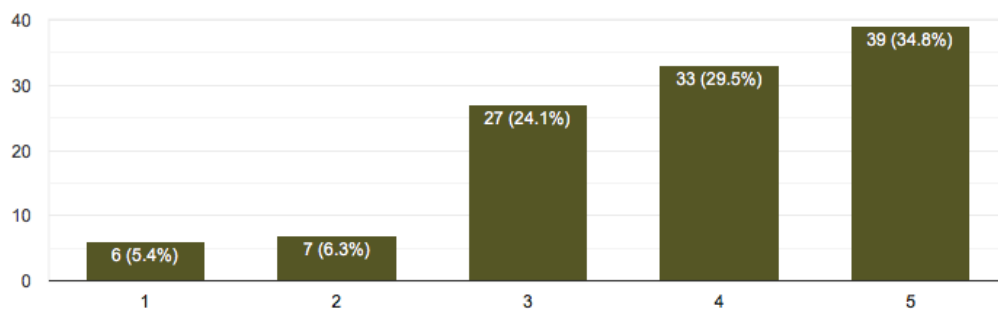
- Despite 60 no longer being the official retirement age, this is still an age many women, in particular, associate with retirement, or at least a change
- Some people thought society viewed them as “old”
- Several reflected that they felt lucky to reach this age, as parents or friends had died before reaching 60
- It was seen by some as a transition to a new stage of life, possibly from middle age to old age (Personally I prefer the Saturn return age descriptors which have the transition at 57-60 as being from adulthood to maturity, and saves old age for the third return at 86-90¹).
- Many mentioned the proximity of death, a theme that runs through the later responses
- For some it was a start of doing things that matter
- It was a time of reflection, that we had experienced much more life before this point than after.

The 20% who didn't see it as a milestone questioned whether age mattered, didn't like birthdays, and also were reluctant to be labelled by society. One saw it as a crossroads instead – an important crossroads in our life.

How important is work in your life? This is a rather broad question, which several people said was hard to answer. However it shows that over 60% rated work as important, and only 13% as not important. It might be interesting to see how this split over the ages, as my suspicion is that many of the post 60 and post 65 group are still working, and largely working because they want to.

4. How important is work in your life?

112 responses



What are you becoming more concerned about as you get older?

Some people viewed this, quite reasonably, as a rather negatively framed question, though I do go on to more positive things later on. I suggested limiting

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturn_return

responses to 3 only, though in practice people could have ticked as many as they liked. The graph shows number of responses.



This shows concerns about **health for yourself and others** coming top, with over 80% choosing this. I wonder if the way I conflated fears about your own health and other people's health (e.g. our parents) made this even higher. Awareness of your own and others' **mortality** comes second (43%) with **financial insecurity** close behind.

In my own mind I link health and mortality as they both for me, give a sense of finiteness, and a need to make the most of the time and health that I have. They are also massive challenges to our ability to accept ourselves in whatever form we find ourselves.

Financial insecurity is interesting, with several people commenting that they had to keep working, even though they didn't want to. Given the demographics of this sample, the majority of us might have expected to be able to retire at 60, but for anyone dependent on a state pension to do so, this isn't an option for several years.

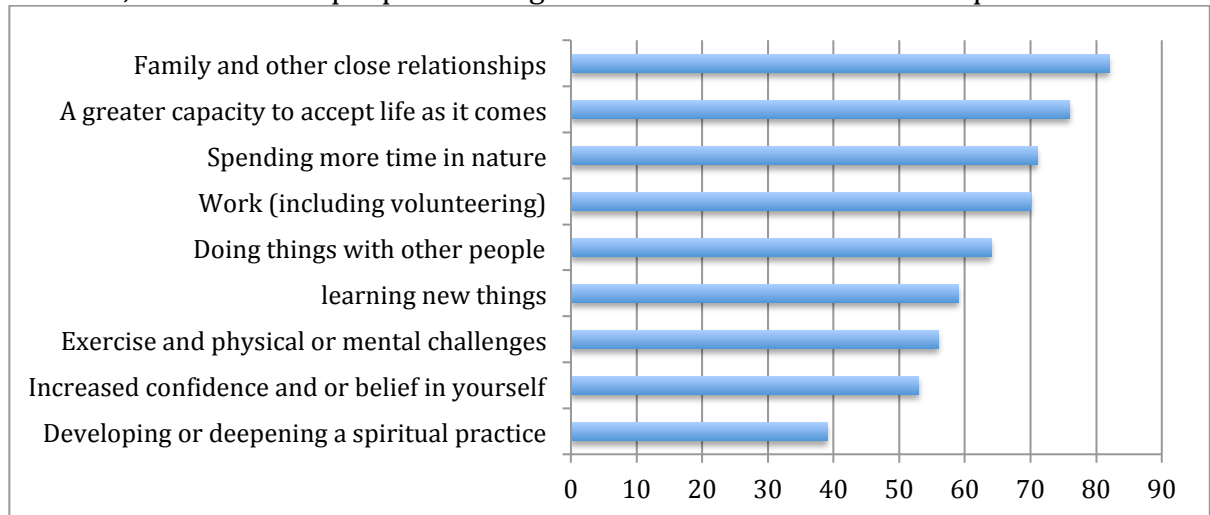
Only a small number worried about **losing identity** when they stop work, possibly because so many respondents are counsellors and had moved to this new profession relatively late in life.

Concerns increasing about **national and global issues** is mentioned by about 35%, which seems surprisingly low to me, but this reflects my own lens of increasing concern about the climate emergency, and biodiversity. A significant minority (20%) felt they were **becoming invisible** or judged as "old" by wider society.

What did this question miss? I didn't distinguish actually feeling **lonely and vulnerable** (22%) now from the fear of feeling lonely and vulnerable in the future, which also comes up for people. And I didn't ask if people felt more inspired to take political action in some form. And interestingly someone also pointed out that we might fear living too long, and having to spend years relying on others.

How do you cope with these challenges? What has given you strength, inspiration and encouragement?

The responses are shown below, as numbers of responses rather than percentages, though I use percentages in the text below. Respondents were not limited to a top three in this question, so there is less difference between the answers, and it reflects people drawing on a number of resources to cope.



The top source of strength, inspiration and encouragement is our **families and close friends** (73%) reminding us that we are essentially relational, social beings, and this interdependence is important throughout our lives, but especially so as we start to recognise our vulnerabilities. An impressive 68% felt they were supported by a **greater capacity to accept life as it comes**, possibly a reflection of the increasing wisdom that can come with age. **Nature** is important to 63% of us, and **work**, not surprisingly, is a support for 62% (which matches the answer to Q4).

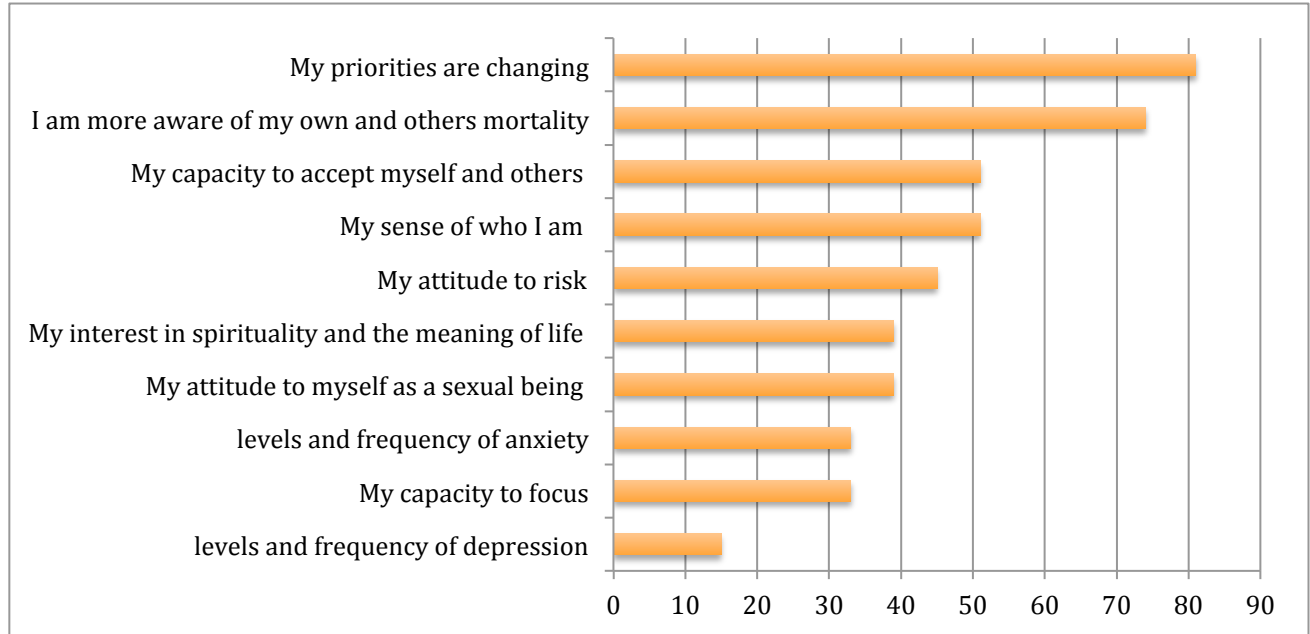
Doing things with other people (60%) and **learning new things** (57%) are often cited as being important to enjoying life at any age, as are **exercise and physical or mental challenges**. (52%)

I was encouraged that 47% felt they had an **increased self confidence** or self belief – and surprised that developing or deepening some form of **spiritual practice** was a source of strength for just 35% of the group.

Some of the freeform response to this question also point towards a greater self awareness, sense of self, and ability to say no to others, and care less about other's views about you. This is explored further below

Do you feel you have changed, or are changing as you get older?

The answers for this question were deliberately framed in a neutral way (with one exception), though what I would have liked to have done would have been to offer a series of choices to indicate more about how each issue was changing. I therefore asked people to comment on the changes they had ticked as Q8, so that I could get more of a feel for the nature of these changes.



80% said their **priorities were changing** – a response that made me wish I had asked more about *how* people's priorities were changing, though the freeform answers gave some indication of this. Close behind, 71% said they were more **aware of their own and others' mortality**, a directional question, and one that chimes with my own experience. About 50% thought their **capacity to accept themselves** and others had changed and a similar number that their **sense of who they are** had changed.

In the graph above we see a smaller number noticing a **change in their attitude to risk** (40%), a little fewer noticing a change in their **interest in spirituality** and meaning, and about 37% feeling they were changing in their attitude to **themselves as a sexual being**. Around 30% felt their **levels of anxiety** were changing and a similar number noticing changes in their **capacity to focus**. Only about 12% thought they were experiencing changes **in levels or intensity of depression**.

Reflections from the free form responses

The free form responses cast a bit more light on the nature of these changes. For example, the most frequent comment was about a greater sense of **self acceptance**, feeling more self confident, and having a greater sense of self, and being able to let things go, and stay in the present moment (about 25% of responses).

There is a strong link, I believe, between changing priorities and a sense of our mortality. About 25 people said they now know more about what **they like doing** and spend more time doing this. Many commented on the importance of spending time with and enjoying their loved ones. The sense of our mortality has prompted some soul searching

"I'm thinking about what I want to do with the rest of my life"

Our changing relationship to others is interesting: The people who said they were more **tolerant** of other people was matched by an equal number who felt they were less tolerant of others, though this was also partially about not wanting to waste time with they didn't feel a genuine connection to, or being bothered what other people think.

"I don't care what others think as much. I'm more outspoken, less patient"

The comments show a great diversity of responses. Not everyone is serenely enjoying the present moment. Anxiety is split: for everyone who is getting less **anxious**, there are similar group who are feeling increasingly anxious. People's relationship to time also varies: some people feel they have more time, and others feel they have less. Several people commented on their delight in trying new things, learning and finding new challenges whilst some recognised that this can sit alongside increasing anxiety. I was interested that anxiety is considerably more referred to than depression, which also comes bottom on the table above.

Some commented on an increased difficulty **in intimate relationships** (about 5%) and I realised that I hadn't asked specifically about the impact of the menopause, which is an oversight. In theory women at this age are coming out of the worst of this transition and starting to step into their wisdom and power as mature women, but it doesn't work like that for many people.

And some people are strengthening or discovering their **spirituality**, or finding their faith is more meaningful to them now. I would be curious to know if there is any relationship between this strengthening and a capacity to make the most of ageing years with the losses that they entail. I rather hope that there is, and also recognise that there are clearly other paths as well,

"I am discovering my spirituality which has been hidden most of my life"

Loss and the potential for loss lurks throughout this survey – possibly reflecting my own lens, and I am moved by how life has dealt us all very different hands in this, with some people just grateful to have even reached 60. It is very hard not to be anxious if a loved one is seriously ill, particularly if it will mark a major changed in life for you. I think the reality is that this is a mixed time as indeed is every stage of life, though we just don't realise this when we are younger.

Joan Chittister recognises this mix in her book **"The Gift of Years"** in which she ends each chapter with a (sometimes rather contrived) reflection on the burden that the chapter's aspect of ageing and the blessing that it brings, for example on transformation:

"A burden of these years is the possibility that I might stay more buried in my losses than aware of my gains.

"A blessing of these years is the transformation of the self to be, at long last, the self I have been becoming all my life – an oasis of serenity in a world gone sour on age, the very acme of life."

Anything else?

My last question asked whether there was anything I had forgotten, or for any final comments.

This inspired several potential new questions, such as:

- The role of gratitude in helping us cope and enjoy life.
- The importance of a sense of purpose and how people have found one.
- More in relation to work – how we plan to retire from paid work at any point, and if so, when and what will influence this decision .
- Your experience of ageism in the workplace and outside.
- Your relationship to time.
- The importance of quality of life and how life stays worth living – and when this might change.
- Recovery from loss, especially of a partner, and parents.
- I am interested in how our state of mind in our 60's reflects the issues we have or haven't tackled in our life so far. One comment certainly resonated with me: *"it's a shame it takes us so long to grow up"*

There were several reflections on the bodily ageing process: frustration with a lack of energy, concerns about reducing memory, concentration, sight and hearing, and making the most of the good health anyone has at this point. Many people said they felt happier and looked after themselves better than ever before. And there was COVID – not something I asked about at all, but it is in the field for us all, and was certainly initially, highly age related.

Several people reflected that they had found the questions interesting and thought provoking – I am glad! I have found it fascinating reading through all the many comments, and in condensing them to a few sentences I am aware that I have lost (for now) a lot of the richness in them.

What now?

The first thing is that I feel deeply appreciative to all those who took the time to complete the survey so fully, and if you have got this far I hope you have enjoyed reading about everyone's responses. I found it has on the one hand normalised my own thoughts fears and experiences, as I hear them chime with others', and at the same time I see how we have such different experiences, so that I cannot assume that just because being in nature and practising gratitude helps me, it will be much of a big deal for other people!

I also find stepping back and looking at an issue that seems very present, such as my imminent 60th birthday, and finding myself increasingly curious as to how it is for other people at the same stage, or for those who have gone on to further years and further apparent milestones, is in itself empowering, encouraging and calming. So I will continue following my curiosity!

I want to use this information to support others, so I am working on an article for potential clients which will draw on some of the findings from this survey. (I am a psychotherapist). If you wish to quote any of this survey findings you are welcome as long as I am suitably credited.

I'll leave you with a quote from Joan Chittister² (2008, 46)

"it is not change that will destroy us. It is the attitude we take to it that will make all the difference.

It all comes down to whether we see our existence now as having meaning for others, as well as ourselves, or as a kind of enforced pause between the end of the life that has happened and the end of the body which will surely follow..."

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² Chittister, J. (2008) *The Gift of Years: growing older gracefully* Bluebridge New York