

## Love is Love—No matter your age

*A healthy sex life is an important part of healthy aging. And yet, intimacy and aging remain “taboo subjects” for some, and LGBT elders in particular are more likely to feel isolated and alone. For traditional senior centers, creating an intentionally inclusive environment may be one way to help.*

Jacki Gethner isn't shy when it comes to talking about sex. In fact, she's been talking about it pretty much nonstop since the 1980s, when she started doing outreach with the HIV/AIDS community after a female friend became infected. In 2010, Gethner founded [Women of a Certain Age](#), a Portland nonprofit focused on providing information and resources for women over 50 on topics including intimate relationships, sexual behaviors, and the importance of screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

But, despite reaching out to thousands of older women—and handing out hundreds of free condoms in local bars—Gethner worries that her message may not be getting through. According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), half of all people living with HIV are over the age of 50, and they account for one in six new cases. Infection rates among older people for other STIs such as herpes, gonorrhea, and syphilis also are on the rise.

In her outreach work, Gethner found that older women often were reluctant to share their sexual concerns, even among friends. “There's still a lot of shame around this issue,” she says. And health care providers rarely bring it up. A 2007 study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that 75 percent of older women with sexual problems go untreated; only 22 percent had talked to their doctor about sex since turning 50.

That's unfortunate, because sexuality is an important part of healthy aging, says Jessica Daniel, an Oregon Health Sciences University student who gives frequent talks on the topic. “Sexual health is not simply an added bonus of living,” Daniel says, “but is an essential pillar of health and wellbeing—up there with a healthy diet, exercise, and mental health.”

### The new sexual revolution

In the 20-plus years since Viagra hit the market, seniors seem to be having more sex than ever. A 2017 [National Poll on Healthy Aging](#) conducted by the University of Michigan found that 40 percent of adults between the ages of 65 and 80 reported being sexually active, and 72 percent said they would like to be. (Half of the men surveyed were interested in sex, compared to 12 percent of women, although women reported being more satisfied with their sex lives.)

Elders also are increasingly hooking up online. A Pew study found that from 2013 to 2015, the number of [online daters aged 55 to 64](#) doubled from six to 12 percent. Sites such as [OurTime](#) and [SeniorMatch](#) now cater exclusively to silver-haired singles.

Although [physical and emotional changes](#) may alter the sexual experience, age in itself is not a deterrent to a healthy sex life, experts say. And the [benefits](#) are well documented: from better sleep and improved bladder control to lower blood pressure and decreased stress. (It's important to note that sexual activity doesn't just include intercourse and orgasm; it can

encompass many kinds of intimate touch, with or without a partner. It's also normal not to engage in sexual activity.)

## **The Grandma Report**

But, while pharmaceutical ads and dating apps extol the virtues of late-life romance, as a society, we're still not entirely comfortable talking about it.

In 2019, Portland artist Salty Xi Jie Ng teamed up with a group of women at the [Hollywood Senior Center](#) to explore the topic of intimacy and aging. Ng, a graduate student in art and social practice at Portland State University, was interested in curating conversations around how intimacy plays out in the lives of older women. The resulting publication, called "The Grandma Report," includes health advice and horoscopes, erotic essays and photographs, and a "slow sex playlist." Participants also offered suggestions for finding intimacy in everyday life, including working jigsaw puzzles with a friend ("fitting our pieces together"), having "rich and honest" conversations, and bringing a potted plant on the bus as a conversation starter.

One contributor, a grandmother who came out as lesbian in her mid-30s, defined intimacy as being accepted for who she was. "It says that someone else sees me, gets me, accepts me."

For these women, Intimacy is about much more than sex. "It is a human need, entangled with notions of desire and loneliness, as well as considerations for mental, social, and physical health. And yet it is a taboo subject, especially from an aging perspective," Ng says. "To examine it is deeply important, even political. To care about intimacy is to care about compassion, connection, and well-being in an increasingly violent world."

## **Bridging the gap**

For seniors who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, issues surrounding intimacy and acceptance can be particularly sensitive. LGBT elders experience higher levels of discrimination in housing and healthcare. They also are twice as likely to be single and live alone, and four times less likely to have children, according to [SAGE USA](#), an advocacy and service organization. "Together, these challenges make it more difficult for LGBT older adults to achieve three key aspects of successful aging: financial security, good health and health care, and community support and engagement."

Traditional senior centers provide much needed services and a sense of community for many older adults; however, they haven't always been perceived as welcoming to LGBT elders, says Megan McCoy, who serves on the advisory council for Friendly House's SAGE Metro Portland and has extensive experience working in senior centers. For LGBT seniors who have lived through a time when being gay was considered a crime or psychological defect, fear of discrimination may prevent them from seeking the care and services they need.

"One of the major challenges LGBT older adults face is the fear of having to go back into the closet in order to access aging services," McCoy says. To bridge the gap, senior centers and other service providers can take steps to be more intentionally inclusive, such as asking about sexual orientation and gender identity, including anti-discrimination language and images of

same-sex couples on their website and printed materials, flying a rainbow flag, and building relationships with the LGBT community.

At the Hollywood Senior Center in northeast Portland, staff have completed [cultural competency training](#) to better understand the unique experiences of LGBT elders. “The center is a trusted resource and access point for many in our community,” explains Amber Kern-Johnson, executive director. “And we have an important role to provide information and programming that serves their diverse and changing needs. A presentation on sexual health or dating after 60 is just as relevant and significant as a workshop on managing your finances or downsizing your home.”

Finding opportunities to engage with each other is critical to creating an atmosphere of acceptance and trust, adds Max Micozzi, manager of SAGE Metro Portland. Last August, SAGE Metro co-hosted a “Hot Summer Nights” party at the Hollywood Senior Center that drew a large, friendly crowd of LGBT and non-LGBT seniors for an evening of music and dancing. This February, they hope to repeat the experience with a Valentine’s Day party that is open to “LGBT+ elders and allies.”

“It’s good to have intimate relationships, but friendships really matter too,” Micozzi says. “Finding those commonalities (outside of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity) is another way to build a deeper relationship and be a support system to one another.” It sends a powerful message: “No matter your status, you are loved by people here.”

*The Hollywood Senior Center and SAGE Metro Portland are co-hosting “Love is Love,” a Valentine’s Day Party for LGBT+ elders and allies, from 1 to 3 p.m. on February 14 at the Hollywood Senior Center, 1820 NE 40th Ave., Portland. The event is open to all, no reservation required, with a \$2 suggested donation. There will be karaoke, live music, dancing, and treats. For more information, contact the Hollywood Senior Center at 503-288-8303 or SAGE Metro Portland at 503-224-2640, [sage@friendlyhouseinc.org](mailto:sage@friendlyhouseinc.org).*