

# 80 Is Not 65: Implications for Geriatric Advocacy

My blog post “80 Is Not 65” resonated with almost everyone who responded. They agreed that physical and mental decline and personal loss are increasingly common as we become very old. They also agreed that, while decline and loss are crushing for some people, many—perhaps most of us—can nevertheless have satisfying lives.

This is all obvious, I suppose. But in my experience as a geriatric advocate, there is very little attention paid to those of us who are very old and experiencing substantial decline—but not becoming so disabled that we need a lot of help just to get through a day.

And I think that advocates and policy makers need to pay a lot more attention to those of us who are over 80. We are, after all, a growing population. Roughly 15 million today; roughly 23 million in ten years. More than half of us are not disabled and in need of day-to-day help.

**We are a population with both substantial challenges and substantial potential.**

And, as the world of commerce should be well aware, we are a substantial market.

What does it mean for geriatric advocacy to pay attention to us?

First, it means that advocacy needs to include **specific attention to people who are very old**, stressing realism about the difficulties of very old age as well as opportunities for satisfaction.

Specifically, the many meetings and conferences that are organized to focus on “aging” should all include something significant about very old people.

Second, it means that **people 80 and older should be involved in those discussions.**

**“Nothing about us without us” has become a motto for many populations, but not for the very old.**

It should apply to us. Meeting and conference organizers should seek us out and ask for participation. Yes, a lot of us are too busy with doctor's visits, family responsibilities, or just enjoying ourselves. But there are still plenty of people over 80 who want to, and can, contribute to the community.

Third, agendas for action should focus on providing the **support that people need to thrive** despite the slings and arrows of being very old. This includes:

- Adequate finances, including not just the protection of Social Security, which is absolutely essential, but finances beyond subsistence.
- A decent place to live, including not just advocacy for “aging in place” but also for people to be able to live where they prefer, whether in the community or in “institutional” settings.
- Access to good health care—re-oriented from treatment of illnesses and injuries to maintaining and developing functional capability.
- Help managing with diminished physical capabilities—especially hearing and vision impairments, imbalance, and instability that contribute to falls, the largest cause of premature disability and death.
- Opportunities to avoid social isolation, including interest groups, senior centers, political organizations, religious organizations, and home visiting programs providing both in-person and telephone or virtual contact.
- Opportunities for satisfying sexual relationships despite declining sexual function for those who want sex to continue to be part of their lives, as well as opportunities for warmth and companionship without ordinary sexual interactions for those for whom that becomes preferable.
- Opportunities to engage in meaningful activities of all sorts including both paid and volunteer work, leisure activities, community service, sports, arts, and spiritual connections.
- Help keeping up with technology, which often seems to change just when we've got the hang of it, forcing us to push open the rusty gates of our minds yet once again.
- Help with widowhood, which is the outcome of virtually all marriages that do not end in divorce.
- Help managing the very difficult emotional journey of dying and death.

All of this is easier said than done. The specifics of coping with the difficulties that come with old age and the opportunities for satisfaction take some spelling out. In subsequent posts, I will try to elaborate.

Got some thoughts on this? Please share them with me.