

Changing Attitudes toward Aging
In Perspective
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Two attractive women with a strong family resemblance were walking together during rush hour when they passed an acquaintance of the younger one. There was no time for introductions. The next day the following conversation took place:

"Was that your mother I saw you with yesterday?"

"No, that was my grandmother."

"Your grandmother? Wow! She doesn't look like grandmother material to me!"

This story, incidentally true, illustrates the rapidity with which attitudes toward aging and our perceptions of physical attractiveness are changing. What constitutes "grandmother material?" Until quite recently and, to some extent even now, we have lived in a culture where qualities associated with youthfulness defined physical beauty and sexuality, especially for women, and a woman who was "grandmother material" was stereotyped as past her prime, interested only in sitting on the front porch, knitting and rocking. Under no circumstances would she be considered sexually attractive, and, if she ever thought of herself as a sexual being, it ceased to be appropriate for her to see herself in such a light once the first grandchild appeared on the scene.

Partly as the result of the declining birth rate, increased longevity, and the subsequent upward shift in the average age of the population, we are seeing both subtle and dramatic shifts in attitudes toward the aging. Slick fashion magazines feature articles on looking good at any age, cosmetics advertisements employ white-haired models, and there have been several recent articles and books concerned with the growing number of older woman-younger man alliances. Jackie Onassis and Lena Horne are still considered two of the world's most glamorous women.

These trends would suggest that older women are being told that they can still be attractive, vital, sexual human beings. And a positive self-image is vital to both physical and emotional well-being. We might thus be witnessing the beginning of an era of increased health, happiness, and productivity for aging Americans.