



Should we act our age?

Women's roles are less defined by age than ever before, which is both liberating and confusing. We asked two experts and six *Psychologies* readers what 'growing up' means today. By Charlotte Northedge

With the boom in plastic surgery, 'kidults' waiting years to settle down, if at all, and a rising tide of baby boomers going back to college and changing careers, or starting new businesses at an age when previous generations were winding down to retirement, it seems the boundaries of age and life stage are shifting. On the one hand we are encouraged to eliminate our wrinkles, hang on to our youthful bodies and 'have it all', whatever our age. Yet, at the same time, we are chastised for coming to parenthood too late, for drinking too much, for being in debt, divorcing too easily, living an extended adolescence and refusing to face up to our responsibilities.

So where does that leave us? We're no longer expected to get married and have children in our twenties, keep house in our thirties and fade into invisibility after our forties. But while we have destroyed the old stages and signposts, we've left little in their place. If we're not going to become invisible, does that mean we should still be struggling to compete with women 20 years younger? There is no longer a uniform for the over 35s – a pleated skirt, button-up cardigan and 'sensible' shoes. But is it acceptable to wear jeans in your fifties? And is spending a month's salary on boots a sign of spontaneity or immaturity? If we're all busy enjoying life to the full and being 'the best we can be', who's doing the voluntary work or focusing on other people? Does growing up mean giving up on selfish pleasures?

Photographs by Libi Pedder

What does 'acting our age' even mean?

TERRI APTER is a psychologist and author of *Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife* (£9.95, Norton)

With a child you could look at age-appropriate behaviours, but if a 50-year-old woman goes out for a drink with her friends, or

dresses in a way that pleases her, then it makes no sense to say she should 'act her age'. The question goes back to the negative stereotypes women are trying to break through.

In recent years there has been some easing of the

expected restrictions and invisibility of mid-life women. Our lives are no longer characterised solely in terms of an empty nest; in fact, for many women it's a very full nest, with elderly parents, adult children who still need care, grandchildren and often a career

as well. But there is still the fear that being not-young makes you less significant, less attractive. Do I have an interesting story once I'm in mid-life?

People in the psychological profession will sometimes say they won't work with someone in their mid-fifties because they'll be too old to change. And yet the women I studied expressed more self-satisfaction in mid-life, had more energy, were more self-assured. They felt they had become socially invisible in a way they weren't before, but this meant they were less self-conscious, and less vulnerable to the shadow voices that tell us what we should be doing and how we should be feeling.

Women have much more social and economic power than we had 30 years ago, and women in mid-life have the advantage of being part of the large baby boom generation that has always been outspoken and influential. Society is changing and women are writing new roles. But that makes some people nervous.

To talk about women needing to 'act their age' is a form of social control.

THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST

We need to get over our obsession with youth

ROSJKE HASSELDINE is a psychotherapist and relationship consultant.

For information on her practice, visit www.counsellingforwomen.com

We need to accept the age we are and concentrate on what is positive about it. Not only is our obsession with youth a losing battle, it is a rather insidious way of making women over 35 invisible. Making youthful looks a woman's benchmark of worth sidelines the wisdom women gather as we get older.

We see celebrities who've had plastic surgery. We're told we're not supposed to have any wrinkles, any grey hair, any fat. The increasing intensity with which ageing women's bodies are attacked coincides with our increased social power. And if we strive to behave and look younger than we are, we are buying into the cultural dictate that to be young is to be better.

Striving to be younger robs us of our money, time, mental space and self-esteem: what you should be asking yourself is, what have I learnt in my life that has made me better? What has made me who I am today?



Q: Is it time we all grew up?

We asked six readers, from twenties to fifties, how they felt about growing older in the 21st century



We want to have it both ways

MARYANN RICHMOND-COGGAN, 43, owns her own business, Personal Property Services, and lives in Dulwich Village. She got married in London last year

I think women are 'growing up' later, but then the accepted roles for women have changed. The upside is that we have so many opportunities and we can act whatever age we feel; the downside is that, because you know there are more options in your thirties and forties, you feel you should be doing it all.

I was probably someone you would call a 'kidult' until recently; I didn't want to get married or have children, I wanted to keep partying. Then I met my husband at 40 and my life has completely changed. I suppose I want it both ways really, because I do believe we should have our independence and stay young, but I was attracted to a man who was a real grown-up. When it came to finding a man, I wanted someone who would look after me.

We can't all avoid responsibility

MADDY PHELPS, 39, is a freelance PR consultant and coach. She is single and lives in Banbury

This is the best time to be turning 40. Roles have changed so much since our mothers were young, I don't think acting your age is even an issue most women think about. It used to be that if you weren't married at 30, you were an outcast, but now there are so many women who aren't willing to conform to those standards that they have become irrelevant. The UK has changed in the past 10 years; we're not so traditional now, we're a more forgiving society.

The problem with that is we are breeding a culture of people not taking responsibility for themselves and their actions. We have become such a litigious society, and we all expect the State to look after us. It's much easier now for people to think, 'someone else will sort that out'. But we can't all avoid responsibility, then where would we be?



Growing up means being accountable

Sophy Silver, 26, is communications manager for Gumtree.com, a website for local community classifieds. She is single and lives in Notting Hill

For me, being a grown-up means taking responsibility for yourself; being self-sufficient, financially independent and not expecting your parents to support you.

Twenty years ago, the norm would be that I was married with children by now. My mum was 24 when she had me. But, like many women my age, I've made a conscious decision to focus on my career in my twenties and have children in my thirties. That means I can be 'grown-up' in some areas of my life – for example, at work – but still enjoy being young when I'm out with my friends. I don't think it's immaturity or irresponsibility; it's enjoying the freedom that women have fought for.

'Being a grown-up means being self-sufficient'



We need to grow up

SARAH TUCKER, 41, is a writer, broadcaster and author of *Have Toddler, Will Travel* (£6.20 from www.amazon.co.uk). She is a single mother and lives in south London with her seven-year-old son

If you're single with no children, then it's fine to act like Peter Pan. But when you have children, you have to accept responsibility. If you want their respect, you have to behave like a grown-up.

There is a trend for acting younger, and along with that comes this thread of selfishness. We think we have to be happy in order for our children to be happy, and we use this as a convenient excuse for getting divorced. But, really, you should have been grown-up enough to realise the commitment you were making in the first place.

I think it's important to keep a young attitude, to keep fit and healthy, and mentally active. But, ultimately, as a parent, you have to accept your responsibilities and grow up.

I refuse to act my age

GAIL HARRIS, 47, is an international brand consultant. She is divorced and lives in Chelsea

I'm running the London marathon next year, I have a demanding career and I like to have fun. Get me on the dancefloor at Chinawhite and I act like a juvenile delinquent. Some people would say I'm scared of getting old, and in some ways I am. I've never wanted to look my age. I haven't had plastic surgery yet, but, believe me, it's not that far away.

Life isn't over at 30 any more. Our lives used to be mapped out, but now you don't have to have children or stay in an unhappy marriage. We're all living until we're a lot older, but you're not going to appreciate that if you write yourself off before you are 40. Age is in the mind: I think you can make yourself feel old. But I still intend to be enjoying life and working hard well into my sixties.



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We shouldn't be ashamed of getting older

LESLEY KEEN, 55, is a freelance health journalist. She lives in Surrey, and has been married for 33 years

When I was growing up, a woman of 55 was a grandma, with white hair and a print apron. We're not defined by our age in that way any more, but perhaps we have gone too far the other way. There's a fear of ageing and a desperate denial of growing up: you see women in their mid-thirties still partying hard and taking all the risks you would expect a teenager to take.

I think women expect too much today: that we can have a long-term relationship, but also be independent, have a successful career, travel the world and look like a 25-year-old. You can't have it all. The sooner you realise it, the sooner you become more content.

In my fifties, I feel I know who I am. If people don't like me, that's fine. It's a question of learning from life experiences and finding your own core of identity. This is a positive aspect of getting older and it should be celebrated.

Be good to yourself



Looking after number one may seem like a selfish attitude, but if you don't, you'll be in no state to look after anyone else. Janey Howl explains



BIOGRAPHY
A qualified leadership and life coach with more than 20 years' experience, Janey Howl is also a chartered psychologist, specialising in professional and personal transitions, and financial coaching.

your chances of succumbing to accidents or illness. It is how you care for yourself that ultimately determines the quality and sustainability of your life.

Caring for yourself means putting yourself first. Yes, you – not your family, your friends, your work, your achievements or your possessions. But isn't that selfish? On the contrary. It is selfish not to take care of yourself because when you neglect yourself, you drain energy from other people. In order to truly give to others, you must first have more than you need.

Take on oxygen

In aircraft safety briefings, they tell you to put on your own oxygen mask first. That's because unless you take care of yourself, you are a

liability. Start taking responsibility for ingesting regular doses of oxygen – the things that bring you joy. And, no, it's not your work, or your children. After all, you were alive and full of the joys of existence before you ever discovered work or became a parent. Oxygen is whatever truly replenishes you. What are the simple things that give you pleasure, but which you forget to do or don't make time for? Possibilities include music, dancing, reading, nature, time with your children/partner/friends... Being good to yourself should be as natural and essential as breathing – it can't be deferred. Even 10-minute chunks of time for yourself can have an impact on how you feel.

Gayle, a 44-year-old nurse, was bringing up two children, caring

The Bible says: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. Yet how do we love ourselves? Do we treat ourselves with the gentleness, kindness, tolerance, forgiveness and respect that we would wish to show others? If you neglect yourself, what does that say about how you treat those around you?

How you care for yourself is the foundation on which you build your life. And what are you building? A towering edifice of multiple complex roles: successful career woman; mother; lover; daughter; friend; charity worker; and artist? You may look good on the outside – size 10 Armani does look great. But what if it's built on a foundation of 30 cigarettes a day, caffeine, stress overload and massive credit-card debt? Running on empty – erratic diet, irritability, being too busy to see friends unless scheduled weeks in advance – increases

You know that you're not taking care of yourself if you:

- 1 React strongly to the unexpected, and get irritable with your loved ones.
- 2 Suffer from disturbed sleep, constantly feel tired and never wake up before the alarm clock.
- 3 Are often late, lose or mislay things, such as spectacles or car keys, and forget anniversaries or birthdays.
- 4 Crave substances such as caffeine, sugar and nicotine.
- 5 Use displacement activity – TV, newspapers, the internet – to hide from people or problems, rather than purely for enjoyment.
- 6 Talk too quickly, and complete other people's sentences but fail to finish your own.
- 7 Use statements like 'I deserve it' and 'I'm worth it' to justify retail therapy.
- 8 Feel guilty about relaxing, choosing to do what you 'should' do and not what you 'want' to do.
- 9 Find it hard to switch off, or focus on one thing for more than 10 minutes.
- 10 Act like your last priority is yourself.