

‘Age is a sloppy proxy’: Older adults push back on idea that staying safe from coronavirus means staying isolated

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The birthday party was a small one, held in a backyard on thirsty, yellow grass under an endless blue sky. Meg Murphy slipped in through the side gate with her husband. She knew the rules, to keep her distance. She'd heard all the health warnings, too. People older than 65 — people like her — should take extra precautions.

All that aside, one of her two sons was turning 37, and she was going to see him on his birthday. Her grandkids, too. They all made their voices louder to fill up the space between, and for two hours, they were together, but not quite. Eventually, the photos began. Murphy took some of her son and then some of her son with his wife and children.

“Oh come on,” her son said. He gestured to her.

And so she went to him, and they hugged. They took a picture of that, too. For a long time they'd been strict about interactions, but it all came so easily in that moment. "It was really monumental for me," she said. "I hadn't touched him in two months almost."

Murphy is 69 years old. That means she falls into the broad category of "older adults" — a category the Centers for Disease Control has said includes anybody 65 years and older. This group, health officials say, is at a higher risk of severe illness should they contract COVID-19. The CDC has an entire webpage for aging and older adults dedicated to tips on safer living.

But it's not as simple as a single number. As the Bay Area moves to reopen, experts and older adults say age shouldn't be the only consideration when deciding who leaves home or returns to work. The broad range of "65 years and older" doesn't differentiate between those who are healthy and fully self-sufficient and the very vulnerable — those with pre-existing conditions and those who live or work in group housing situations. Moreover, it exacerbates existing tensions between generations: OK Boomer vs. Avocado Toaster.

"Age is a sloppy proxy," said Louise Aronson, a professor of medicine at UCSF and author of "Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life."

"Chronological age is, in many respects, kind of a blunt instrument," said Paul Irving, chairman of the Milken Institute's Center for the Future of Aging at UC Davis.

None of this means age doesn't factor when it comes to risk. Those who are 65 years and older account for 80% of coronavirus-related deaths in the United States. That's not just a matter of hypertension — though the chances of having a comorbidity increase with age.

"Aging itself affects virtually every organ system in our body," said Laura Carstensen, the founding director of Stanford University's Center on Longevity. "We don't regulate temperature as well as we get older. Our lungs don't function quite as well as we get older. They're considered 'normal changes' with age. . . . But normal, by definition, means it happens to virtually all people."

Still, a 65-year-old is no more like a 90-year-old than they are a 45-year-old. "If you look at the curve anywhere, the risk is not equally distributed," Aronson said. "The death rate starts going up in the 50s. It goes up more in the 60s. It gets pretty bad in the 70s. It looks god-awful after 80. So we're sort of lumping them. But more importantly than that is we're stripping them of their agency."

Murphy put it plainly. "People should be able to make their own decisions." So, on her son's birthday, she hugged him. "I just feel that we need to see other people and be with other human beings. I just think that's an essential human need."

Touch and simple human considerations tend to get lost in numbers and curves. As the threat stretches on, people must weigh relative risk. What is a hug worth? Or a walk in the park?

Ever since the novel coronavirus began to spread widely in the United States, there's been a lot of talk about grandma and grandpa. On March 17, the same day seven Bay Area counties initiated stay-at-home orders, the hashtag #DontKillGrandma began to trend. "We need you to do this, if not for yourself, then for your abuela. Do it for your granddaddy. Do it for your big momma. Do it for your pop pop," said Surgeon General Jerome Adams. He was speaking, directly, to Latino and black families, but the point was still the same. Younger people needed to think about older people.

And then there's the reverse. "You can call me a Grandma killer," conservative author Bethany Mandel tweeted a week ago. "I'm not sacrificing my home, food on the table, all of our docs and dentists, every form of pleasure (museums, zoos, restaurants), all my kids' teachers in order to make other people comfortable. If you want to stay locked down, do. I'm not."

Both Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor of Texas, and Ken Turnage, an Antioch planning commissioner, put it just as bluntly. "Lots of grandparents," Patrick said, would risk their lives to shore up the economy for their grandchildren. "There are more important things than living."

"A herd gathers its ranks, it allows the sick, the old, the injured to meet its natural course in nature," Turnage wrote on Facebook. He was quickly removed from office.

Judy Lynch, 67, lives alone in San Francisco and hasn't seen her daughter (a nurse) or her daughter's husband (a firefighter and paramedic) for nine weeks now. And her son — "I have a son ... his wife is pregnant and due in September," she said. "I'm trying to not think about holding that baby when it's born."

Even so, Lynch, a retired nurse and longtime advocate for the aging who now knows what it means to age, doesn't much like the word "grandma." Neither do most women she knows. They'd rather be "CeCe" or "JuJu" or something else. And news reports that boil a person down to a "68-year-old grandma" — she doesn't like those either. "It diminishes who we are. We're so much more. ... We are still pursuing our own interests."

Every Saturday, Lynch joins a Zoom call with 10 friends she's known since high school, even grade school. And on these calls, she sees people like her. Older, yes — 67 to 72 years old — but healthy. She sees people "looking for meaning in life. Greater meaning in life. We're able to pursue interests we couldn't before. We're led by our passions."

More Information

'Who you calling elderly?' Tell your stories

The coronavirus crisis has surfaced assumptions about older adults, who are more vulnerable to the disease but hardly the only population affected. We'd like to hear from you — those over 60 and those who have older loved ones — about your experience during shelter-in-place and the concept of age post-lockdown. Email Chronicle staff writer Ryan Kost, rkost@sfchronicle.com

Steven Tarantino is on these calls, too. He's a 72-year-old, "80% retired" civil engineer. "Recognizing that you can impact people is not insane. That is totally appropriate," he said. "Even I behave that way. My 97-year-old mother, I don't go visit her. That would be careless." So would dismissing him, or aging and older adults more broadly. "If you talked to me, you wouldn't guess my age." Being 65 or 72 is different for him than for his father. When people offer him a seat on public transit, he wavers between insulted and thankful. What he does know, though, is age is valuable. "You've got this whole life experience you can draw on. You've been there."

Donald Trump is 73 years old; Joe Biden 77. The average age of a U.S. senator is just shy of 62. In 2005, the average American CEO was 46. As of 2018, she was 54. In the next two years, the National Institutes of Health is projected to award most of its grants to applicants who are 56 years and older; this will end a 20-year streak of favoring those between 41 and 55 years old.

"Our country will not be as good if people 65 years and older die. They're the most educated group in the population," said Carstensen of Stanford's Center on Longevity. They're expert scientists and lawyers and teachers and politicians. "Most of the people who are influencing the world in powerful leadership positions are older."

Longer lives and lower birth rates mean "our population will look much older in the decades to come," Irving said. "Older adults are our only growing resource."

Telling everybody 65 and older to stay at home for the next year or two or three — to make themselves small, quiet and nearly invisible — doesn't make sense, Carstensen said. "We need all hands on deck."



Roz Koo, 92-years-old, walks through the garden of her apartment building on Thursday, May 14, 2020 in San Mateo, California. Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Want to hear about what an older person might offer? asked Rosalyn Koo. What about her, a 92-year-old woman whose home is the Peninsula Regent, an independent-living community in San Mateo?

State and local guidelines prohibit visitors, so her neighbors play bingo together from their balconies. Koo walks the gardens, breathing in the roses and magnolias and cherry blossoms. She makes phone calls, too.

Koo helped found Self-Help for the Elderly's San Mateo senior center. Self-Help has closed its physical spaces, but they still deliver food to those who need it. And they offer connection from a distance. Koo and about eight others have split the duty of calling 1,000 of the center's users. They have another 100 to go. They speak to them in Mandarin or Cantonese or English. "Mostly they appreciate someone calling them. I tell them this all will pass, and we can come back to the senior center again. Something to look forward to."

That sort of comfort goes only so far. As for a long-lasting stay-at-home directive: "It's not going to work," said Anni Chung, president and CEO of Self-Help for the Elderly. "Just the last eight weeks has been problematic for them." She's heard members cry. "Why am I living? What's the point?"

Particularly for the very old, isolation can impact physical and mental health. It can also affect cognitive abilities. Senior centers are more than physical spaces; the community they provide is a lifeline.

“We’ve got to find a way for our seniors to get back to normal,” she said. “We have to open up some of our senior centers to take care of those that really should not be left alone and isolated at home.”

“Bad things can happen to anybody,” Aronson said. “I think we need to make really clear that everybody can get this, bad things happen to everybody of all ages.”

So it’s a matter of risk assessment; not a strict number. Aronson’s mother is 86, and her mother’s friend, just one year younger, goes on bike rides. “She has a mask and gloves and whatever, and she’s nowhere near anyone. She’s doing it early when the streets are empty.”

A calculated risk. A nuanced risk. “The same guidelines,” Aronson said, “the same restrictions should apply to everybody who is a competent adult.”

As everything opens, say Koo and Lynch and Tarantino and Murphy, they’ll measure their own risks. Lynch will wait for jazz clubs to open safely; in the meantime, she’ll hike the Presidio. Tarantino has plans to golf but no plans to play cards. And Murphy has no plans for “big crowd things.” Not for “quite a while.”

But she will go to her son’s birthday party. She’ll watch her grandkids play in their small, inflatable pool. She’ll eat some chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream cake. And she’ll hug her sons.

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