Debunking some of the myths related to ageing.

GROWING old is every woman’s nightmare (apart from getting fat). However, considering that it is part and parcel of life, every woman would be better off learning how to age gracefully, rather than fighting age and growing old in the process!

It is an accepted fact that women are living longer these days, due to better lifestyles and healthcare. But even though ageing is inevitable, it does not mean that we just sit back and grow wrinkly and decrepit.

Perhaps, the biggest myth of all is that older people are no longer of any use in society. This disregards the wealth of experience and wisdom that older people can contribute to the workforce, the community, and to our own families. – AFP

Ageing is not a disease, it is a phase of our lives. Women can age gracefully and healthily, embracing and adapting to the changes in their bodies.

What does ageing successfully mean? The word “success” can be deceptive. When we talk about ageing successfully, people assume that it means achieving wealth, status, or power at retirement age.

For me, however, ageing successfully means: i) being in good health (with few diseases and/or disabilities); ii) being mentally healthy and alert (not suffering from dementia or loss of cognitive functioning); and iii) being fully engaged in life (good relationship with family and friends, and enjoying daily activities).
Part of the reason we are so afraid of ageing is because we have been brought up to believe in certain myths about growing old. We know all the negative perceptions – that being old equals being sick, frail, disabled, weak, demented, alone, irrerversibly sick, and unhappy.

Believing all this, we start to behave as if we are truly old and useless. We become what we feared all along – unproductive, a burden to society, and completely dependent on the charity of others.

Here are some of the most common myths of ageing:

**Myth #1: To be old is to be sick**

While it is true that the risk of many chronic diseases get higher with older age, we have also managed to reduce the impact of such diseases on people’s lives.

Today, we know much more about the science behind chronic conditions like heart disease, cancer, stroke, arthritis, and dementia. By controlling and reducing risk factors like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking and unhealthy eating habits, we can help women to live long, productive, and enjoyable lives.

**Myth #2: You become dull and mentally slow**

Contrary to common belief, older people can remain mentally alert and learn new things.

Many people are afraid that they will become extinct or obsolete as they grow older, because they are intimidated by the changing times and technology.

To be honest, some mental functions do slow down with age. We process information and respond a little slower than we used to, we find it difficult to remember things like names, phone numbers, and locations, and it’s hard to learn new things when the instructions are too complicated.

However, fear is a state of mind – you can learn new skills and improve your memory if you are physically active, have strong social support, and confidence in yourself. You should learn at your own pace, practise a lot and don’t let embarrassment get in your way.

You can also prevent mental losses, to a great extent. What people blame on age may actually be caused by their lifestyle habits, such as poor nutrition, lack of exercise, smoking, excessive alcohol, or insufficient use of mental abilities.

As you get older, you can maintain or even increase your mental functioning by reading, doing word games and mental exercises, engaging in stimulating conversation, and keeping up with social relationships with friends and family.

A person’s social support network is also extremely crucial, but often sadly underestimated. Being alone, or experiencing loneliness, can be a powerful risk factor for poor health. A person may be
surrounded by family and friends, but still feel isolated because he/she believes that no one cares anymore, or that he/she has nothing in common with the people around them.

Having emotional, physical, and personal contact makes a big difference to your health, and can prevent or reduce some health-related effects of ageing.

*Myth #3: You can't turn back time*

So you’ve been diagnosed with high blood pressure, and you think that you’re doomed to suffer from heart disease, with no chance to enjoy your life ever again.

The good news is, you can turn back the clock a little. Maybe you will not achieve the youthful vigour that you had decades ago, but you will appreciate the health benefits and quality of life that comes with a few lifestyle changes.

Take a good look at your daily activities. Are you still smoking? Are you eating fatty foods and huge meals every day? Are you mostly inactive, where the only exercise you get is walking out the front door to get your newspaper?

Well, it’s never too late to reverse these behaviours. Start with some light physical activity like walking and gardening, and work up to more strenuous aerobic and strength training exercises. Older women who exercise are 20% less likely to die than those who are sedentary.

Change your diet, especially by cutting down on fat. Stop smoking as well – the risk of heart disease falls as soon as you stop smoking.

Not only will you feel the difference, you will also lower your risk of heart disease and colon cancer, as well as reduce the effects of diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis.

Perhaps the biggest myth of all is that older people are no longer of any use in society. This disregards the wealth of experience and wisdom that older people can contribute to the workforce, the community, and to our own families.

Giving older people the opportunity to contribute in their own way – through paid work, volunteering in churches, hospitals or NGOs, and caring for grandchildren or an ill spouse – gives them back their independence and their passion for life.

Growing old is not a bad thing. Follow this adage and you will enjoy life: change what you can and accept what you can’t.
Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar is a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist (FRCOG, UK). For further information, visit www.primanora.com. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader’s own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.