

I'm 69. Please stop saying that I'm in midlife or middle-aged

Calling older people 'middle aged' treats ageing as something to be afraid of and hidden rather than celebrated. We need new ways of talking about this stage of life, says Denise Taylor, who does not want to pretend that 60 is really 40 – and has a suggestion about how to name this stage properly

By Dr Denise Taylor | Saturday 12 September 2026



Extending 'midlife' further and further is not the answer to accepting the ageing process (Ilona Gierach)

Last week I turned 69. And I don't think I'm middle-aged.

I understand why people use the term. We are living longer, many of us are healthier for longer, and people in their sixties and seventies often feel very different from previous generations at the same age. But extending midlife further and further doesn't seem to me to be the answer.

The long-running MIDUS study asked people when they thought midlife ended. The average answer was 59. That feels much closer to my own sense of it.

When I turned 60, nothing happened. Nobody treated me differently. I didn't feel a shift in my body. If anything, I was the healthiest I had ever been. There has been research done in the past that suggests most of us feel younger than our years past 40, so perhaps this isn't unusual.

But I'm less interested in feeling younger than in simply being 60, or 69, and having that be enough of an answer on its own.

So I was fascinated to read research from Stanford suggesting that ageing may not happen at a slow, steady pace. The researchers found dramatic molecular changes at two particular points in adulthood, around the ages of 44 and 60, involving everything from immune function and cardiovascular health to the way we metabolise carbohydrates and alcohol.

Yet I didn't recognise myself in the idea of some great physical shift at 60 at all.

And that interested me. Because perhaps part of the problem is that we still don't have very good ways of talking about this stage of life. We seem to move from midlife to old age without much language for what comes between. And I don't want to pretend that 60 is really 40, or that 70 is really 50. I'd rather acknowledge that these years are different.



That time between midlife and old age is full of opportunities – we just don't know how to correctly engage with it (Getty Images)

What would it actually mean to name this stage properly?

The phase from 60 to 80 feels to me like a distinct period of life. It isn't simply an extension of midlife, and it isn't necessarily old age as most people imagine it either. It has its own possibilities, limitations, changes and questions.

My own life since 60 certainly hasn't looked like winding down. I divorced, completed a doctorate, bought four acres of woodland, wrote more books and eventually stepped back from much of the work that had defined me for decades. In many respects my life has expanded. But I am also more aware of my body, of people around me becoming ill or dying, and of the simple mathematical fact that there is more life behind me than ahead. Both things are true.

Work can look different here, not necessarily less of it, but differently motivated. The question shifts from: what am I climbing toward? to: what is actually worth my remaining time? Relationships can become more selective too, while creativity may intensify once there is less need to build a career or prove something to anyone.

None of this requires the dramatic “reinvention” we’re so often told later life should involve. Simply continuing, doing work you value and ageing without a headline-worthy transformation attached, is good enough.

There is loss in these years too, and pretending otherwise is its own erasure. Parents die, friends die, capacities narrow in places even when health holds up in others. A stage of life that can't hold both the loss and the freedom honestly isn't being named. It's being marketed.

I've been trying to find a name for it. The one I keep coming back to is: olderhood, roughly the years from 60 to 80.

Not because everyone between those ages is the same, or because something magical happens on a particular birthday, but because it gives us a way to acknowledge that this is a life stage of its own.



If the image of being older is being frail – we need to keep proving we are the exception (Getty Images)

For me, olderhood is less about a number than a shift in orientation. Your career stops being the organising principle of identity, and something else moves into that space: a clearer sense of who you actually are, alongside an honest reckoning with the fact that time is now finite in a way it wasn't at 40.

That's not decline. It's focus.

This didn't happen to me because some biological alarm went off at 60. It happened because I stopped organising my life around who I was supposed to become and started paying attention to who I already was.

I notice how rarely that's the picture we're given of ageing.

Too often, age itself is treated as something to be afraid of, something to be managed out of sight rather than lived through. Look at photographs of older celebrities, women in particular. Nicole Kidman is a good example, styled and retouched in the photos for her recent Vogue shoot until it's genuinely hard to tell how much of what you're seeing is her face and how much is the work done to it. The message underneath is simple: you are allowed to be this age, as long as no one can actually see it.



It's time we stopped airbrushing women's real age out of existence and started to celebrate everything that we can do in olderhood
(Venetia Scott/Vogue)

And the flip side is just as damaging.

If the only publicly visible image of being old is frailty, then everyone who is older but not frail has to keep proving they're the exception.

I'm 70, but I can still do this.

I'm 65, but I can still...

That "but" is doing a lot of work, and it's exhausting, because it means the only way to be seen as vital at this age is to distance yourself from your own age group. And if we keep doing that, younger people only see frailty when they picture old age. They also need to see that being 70 or 75

can mean being active, curious and engaged with life. That is part of what living longer actually looks like.

I'd rather say it plainly. Old and active. Old and curious. Old and, some days, tired.

Olderhood shouldn't need a disclaimer. It should just be visible, ordinary, and allowed to look like what it actually is.

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