



Social Stratification: The Elderly Part I

It's ageism, far more than the passage
of time, that makes growing older
harder for all of us.

Ashton Applewhite



Aging and Society

- Social stratification by age is the most fundamental of stratification systems.
 - **age stratification**: the unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege among people at different stages of the life course
- Age stratification is similar to other forms of stratification with the distinctions between strata being drawn by age groups.
- Age is an **ascribed status** that provides a basis for social differentiation.





Aging and Society

- Age is also a **master status** that commonly overshadows all others in some countries.
- Once people are labeled old, the designation has a major impact on how others view them and how they view themselves.
- Society's definition and treatment of its elderly is **socially constructed**.
- Nothing in the nature of aging produces any particular set of attitudes. Rather, attitudes toward the elderly are rooted in culture and differ from one social group to another.



Aging and Society

- More world population is considered elderly than ever before.
- As a nation's elderly population grows, its younger working citizens are increasingly expected to help pay for elder needs.
- Every society is experiencing a drain on its resources.
- **old-age dependency ratio**: ratio of elderly to working age population





Aging and Society

- The problem of how to address the needs of the elderly is very complex because age alone does not always qualify as the measurement of being old.
- Age is not merely a biological function of the number of years one has lived, or of the physiological changes the body goes through during the life course.
- It is also a product of the social norms and expectations that apply to each stage of life.



Aging and Society



- Like other forms of stratification, age stratification varies from culture to culture.
- **gerontocracy**: form of organization in which elderly have the most wealth, power and prestige ... most likely to occur in pastoral, horticultural and agrarian societies ... Japan is the exception.
- **Industrial societies** often consign older people to marginal participation in the economy.
- No single set of attitudes, beliefs or policies regarding the elderly characterizes the world's nations. Rather, they vary from exclusion and killing to integration and honor.



Life Expectancy

- ...statistical measure of the average time a person is expected to live, based on the year of their birth, their current age and other demographic factors
 - shaped by social factors: gender, race, social class
 - beginning 1900s: 50.2 years for US women, 47.2 years for US men
 - currently: 86.6 years for US women, 85.3 years for US men
 - current world: 71.1 years for women, 67 years for men



Growing Old: Biology and Culture

- **gerontology**: scientific study of the sociological and psychological aspects of aging and problems of the elderly
- The effects of aging depend on biological, social and environmental factors.



- **primary aging**: biological molecular and cellular changes
- **secondary aging**: biological aging that occurs due to controllable factors such as lack of physical exercise and poor diet



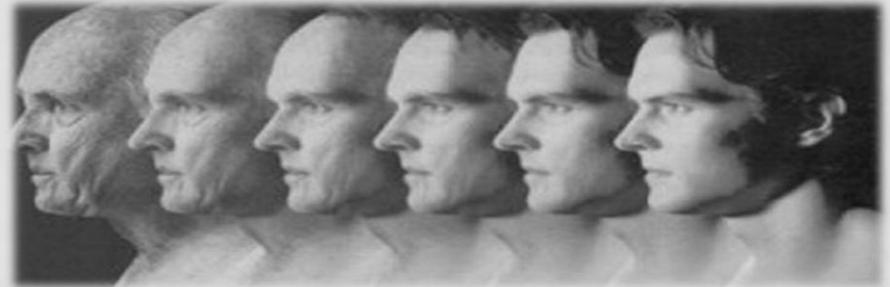
Growing Old: Biology and Culture

- **psychological changes**
 - ability to learn new material and to think quickly declines
 - short-term memory less accurate, long-term memory more accurate
 - slowed responses
 - Artistic abilities often develop in later life.
 - Over 50% of 55+ years report being very happy.



Growing Old: Biology and Culture

- **biological changes**
 - wrinkles, loss of vitality, etc
 - **dementias**: cognitive impairment, loss of memory, Alzheimer's, etc
 - declining energy
 - food sensitivity
 - increase in functional impairments (loss of hearing and vision) and chronic diseases
- **culture**: significance of growing old varies





Age Stereotypes

- The elderly are burdened by negative stereotypes.
- Studies find the elderly are perceived as senile, meddlesome, conservative, inactive, unproductive, lonely and uninterested in sex.
- The majority of men and women remain sexually active well into their 70s and 80s.
- The majority of the elderly adjust well to changes.
- Only about 10% of the elderly become senile.



Age Stereotypes

- Older women are perceived as having lost their sexual appeal, contrary to older men who are “dashing.”
- One of the most difficult adjustments of old age is widowhood.
- Elderly are thought of as technophobes.
- Increasing numbers of computer-savvy elderly are eager for civic engagement and lifelong education programs.





Sociology of Death and Dying

- **Industrialization and new technology** created changes in the pattern of dying in the West.
- radically altered the circumstance of dying
- death transformed from something that generally happened at home with the family to an event managed by professionals in hospitals
- became an isolated event, became something society is uncomfortable with
- **cultural lag**: situation in which some parts of culture change more slowly than others ... technology changes faster than the values of the culture



Sociology of Death and Dying

- Historically death was routine. Now it is removed from life.
- ethical issues
 - **When does death occur:** no response to stimulation, no movement or breathing, no indication of brain activity.
 - **right to die:** Living wills are widespread but **euthanasia** (assisting in the death of a person) is still illegal in many countries.





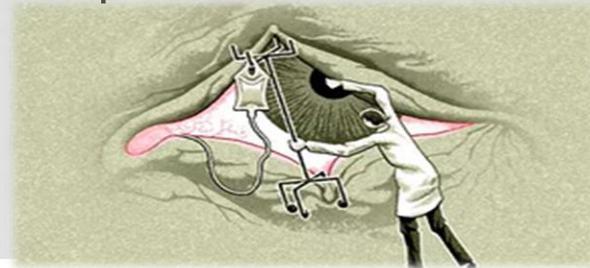
Sociology of Death and Dying

- **bereavement**: response of family influences the dying person ... Hospice helps people by providing palliative care (focuses on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, physical and mental stress of a serious illness).
- **hospice**: dedicated to providing dignity in death and making people comfortable ... bring services into a person's home ... at any one time, approximately 100,000 Americans in hospice care
- **adjusting to death**: tend to perceive death based on the values of culture ... Viewing death as a loss (vs. a natural or tranquil transition) is considered normal in West.



Sociology of Death and Dying

- adjusting to death
 - Controversy surrounding death with dignity laws is emblematic of the way US society tries to separate itself from death.
 - **sanctity of life**: perspective that all natural life has intrinsic meaning and should be appreciated as a divine gift
 - **quality of life**: perspective that when life no longer has quality, death is preferable to living a life devoid of meaning



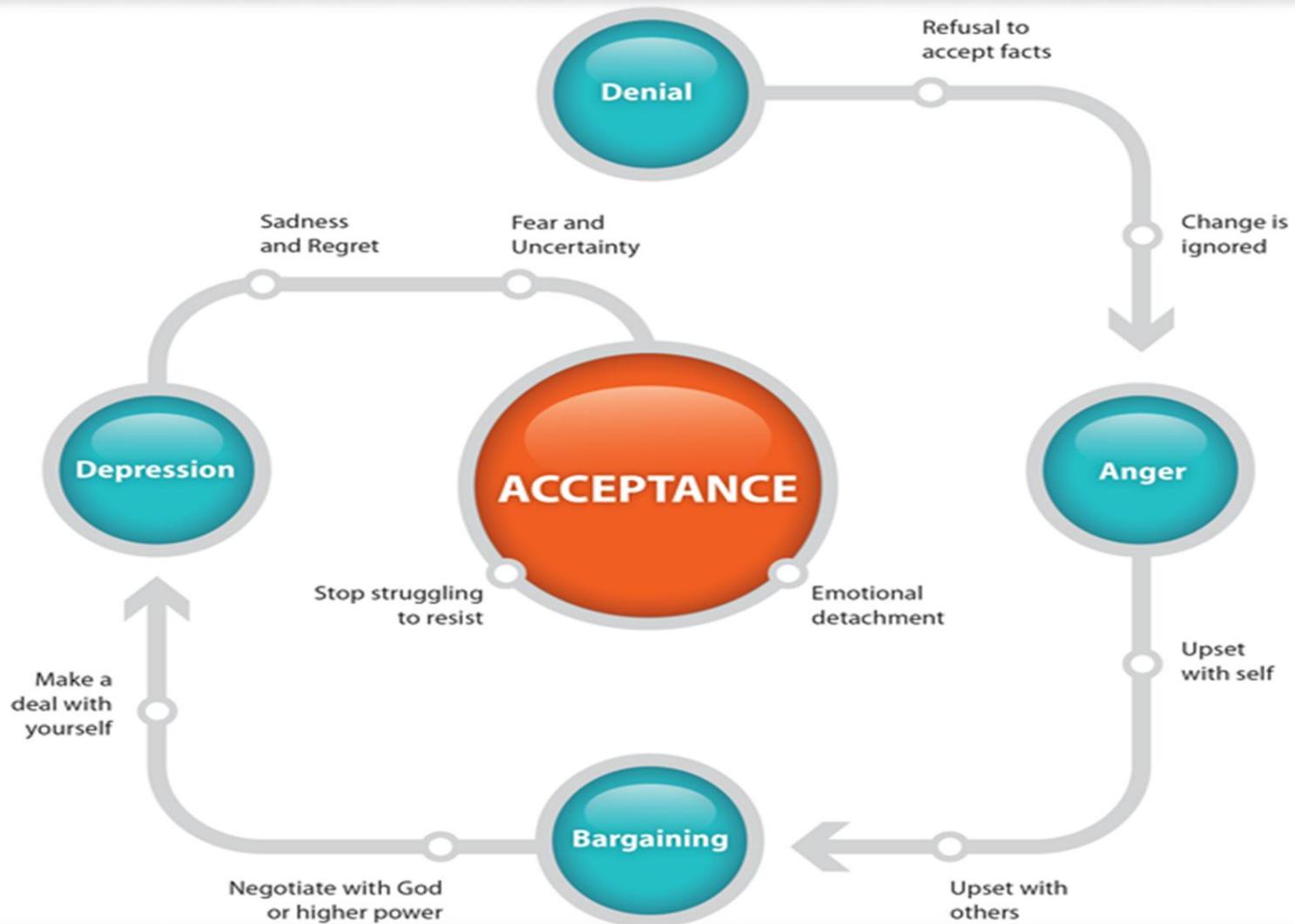


Sociology of Death and Dying

- death as a process
 - Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's **five stages of grief**: a cycle of emotions that humans can expect to feel when confronted with death
 - denial
 - anger
 - negotiation/bargaining
 - depression
 - acceptance



Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief





Transitions and Problems of Aging

- Physical decline in old age is less serious than most younger people think.
- **retirement**: relatively recent idea ... lower income, reduced social prestige, loss of purpose
- **finding meaning**
 - Older people recognize that their lives are nearing the end.
 - The elderly spend more time reflecting on their past.





Transitions and Problems of Aging

- Elderly are too diverse to be a culture.
 - young old: 65-74 years
 - older elderly: 75-84 years
 - oldest old: 85+ years, 2/3 are women
- Do have properties of minority or subordinate group.
 - experience unequal employment treatment
 - share physical characteristics
 - involuntary membership
 - strong sense of group solidarity
 - generally married to others of comparable age



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Ageism

- ...prejudice and discrimination against the elderly
- While individuals often encounter stereotypes associated with race and gender and are more likely to think critically about them, many people accept age stereotypes without question.
- Ageism is deeply rooted in Western culture.
- Ageist attitudes and biases based on stereotypes reduce elderly people to inferior or limited positions.
- As elder-care costs rise, elderly viewed by younger individuals as rivals for economic resources and political clout.





Transitions and Problems of Aging: Types of Ageism

Personal Ageism

Bias against persons or groups based on their older age

Institutional Ageism

Missions, rules and practices that discriminate against individuals or groups because of their older age

Intentional Ageism

Practices carried with knowledge of bias: take advantage of the vulnerabilities of older persons

Unintentional ageism

Practices in which perpetrators unaware of bias against persons or groups based on their older age



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Contributors to Ageism

- shift from multigenerational households to nuclear-family households reduced contact between generations
- older people not as essential to economic survival of their families and communities as in the past
- wealth, power and prestige are held by those in younger age brackets
- reflects a deep uneasiness about growing old on the part of younger people
- rapid technology and media advancements have required new skill sets elderly less likely to have





Transitions and Problems of Aging: Contributors to Ageism

- **influence of mass media**
 - past 50 years: Mass media have had an overall negative effect on society's attitudes toward aging.
 - since 1970s: gradual change ... older people now more visible in commercials, ads, television and movies
 - intensified discussions in media of plastic surgery, Botox injections, other treatments intended to make people look and feel younger
 - few messages that older people are alive, active and living well



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Consequences of Ageism

- **loss of employment** for elderly .. illegal, hard to prove
- The New Normal for Experienced Workers
- damages positive and efficient working relationships
- businesses lose the extensive work experience and knowledge of older employees



- creates a negative environment and poor perceptions of management
- may lead to loss of other employees
- elderly feel **frustrated and resentful** that their skills are going to waste



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Consequences of Ageism

- creates elderly **anxiety about the future**
- many view **caring for elderly relatives as a burden ...**
majority of family caregivers employed outside home
- elderly viewed as dependent, helpless, unproductive and demanding
- elderly talked down to or ignored
- **elderly attitudes toward their own age group as unfavorable as younger people's attitudes**
- Elderly with positive perceptions of aging live an average of 7.5 years longer than those with negative images of growing older.



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Consequences of Ageism

- less likely to receive **preventive care** and often lack access to **doctors trained in their needs**
- feel a **lack of power and control** in daily living situations
- hurts **self-esteem** of aging individuals and can even take a toll on their health
 - Elderly exposed to positive stereotypes about their age showed significantly better memory and balance than those exposed to negative views.
- leads to feelings of **depression and stress**





Transitions and Problems of Aging: Consequences of Ageism

- causes lowered **mental health** as well as lower self-rated health
- **self-fulfilling prophecy**: lower mental and physical expectations for the elderly can cause depression and lead to accepting deterioration of their body and mind
- Ageism is creating a society where the golden years are becoming years of frustration, depression, anxiety and resentment. A community of mature adults is being created who are scarred by an experience that stays with them forever.



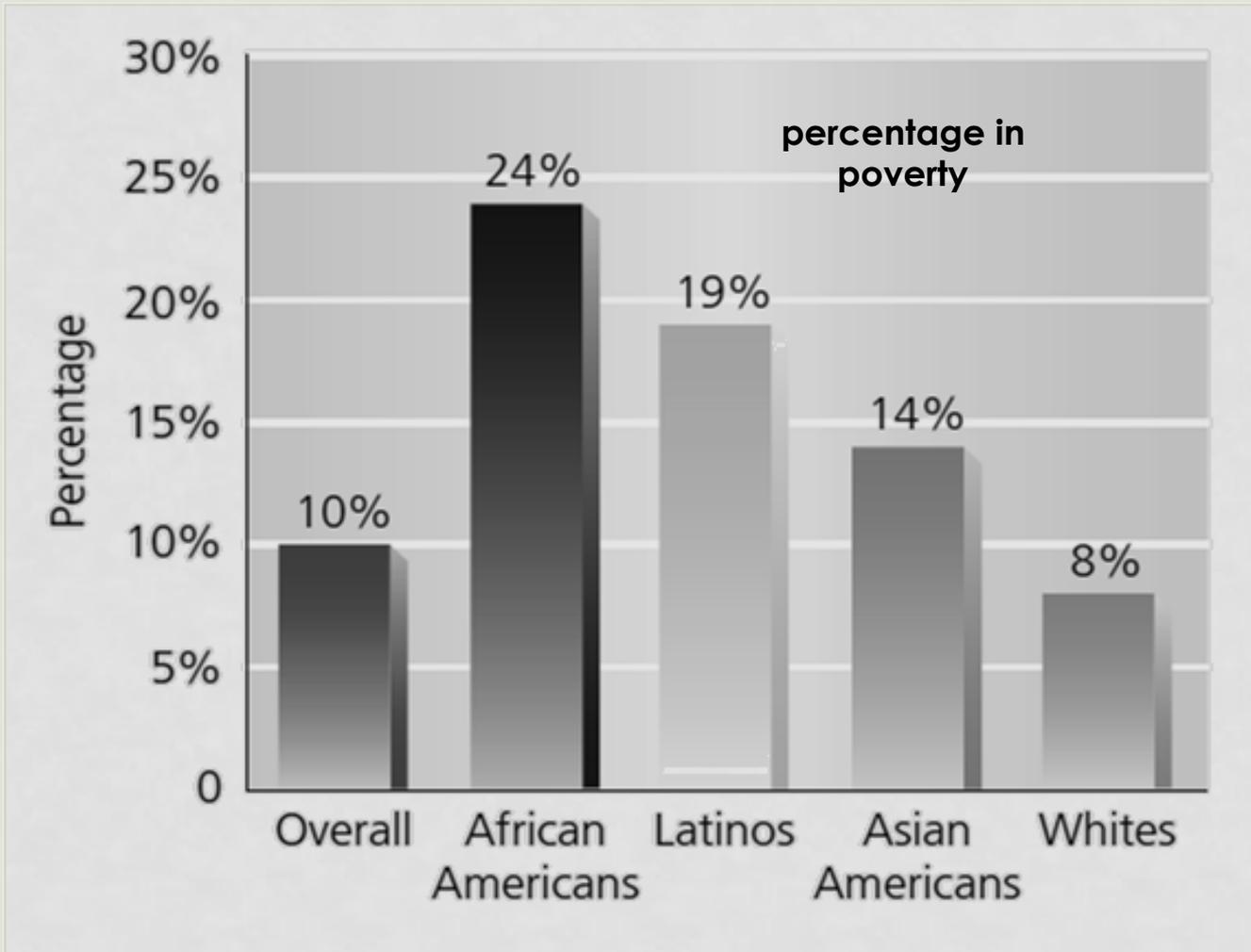
Transitions and Problems of Aging Poverty

- reduced income and heavy medical expenditures
- Poverty rate has declined substantially since 1980 but many lack sufficient savings and inflation affects their fixed incomes.
- Poverty among the elderly reflects gender, racial and ethnic patterns of general society.
 - Women and people of color are most vulnerable.
 - African-Americans have the largest percentage of US elderly living in poverty.
- Poverty may be hidden.





Transitions and Problems of Aging Poverty





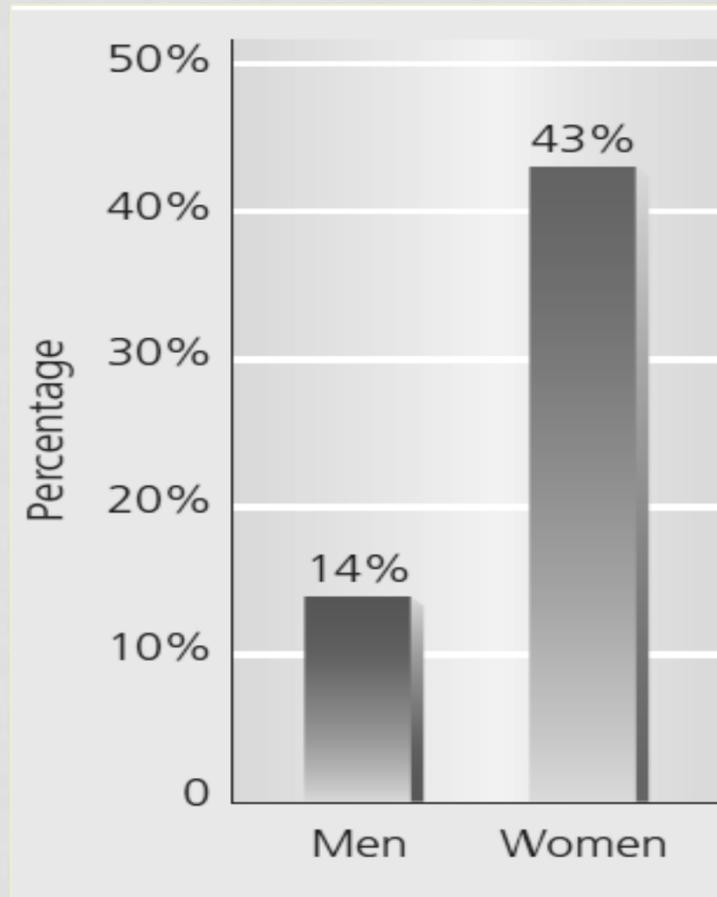
Transitions and Problems of Aging: Social Isolation

- Isolation is most common among elderly people.
 - The greatest cause of social isolation is the inevitable **death of significant others**.
 - Unlike the past, most people die in remote and clinical settings.
- Various factors, **disability and major life events**, can put elderly at risk of experiencing social isolation.
- **Physical and geographic isolation** often leads to social isolation.
- **Transportation challenges** can lead to social isolation.

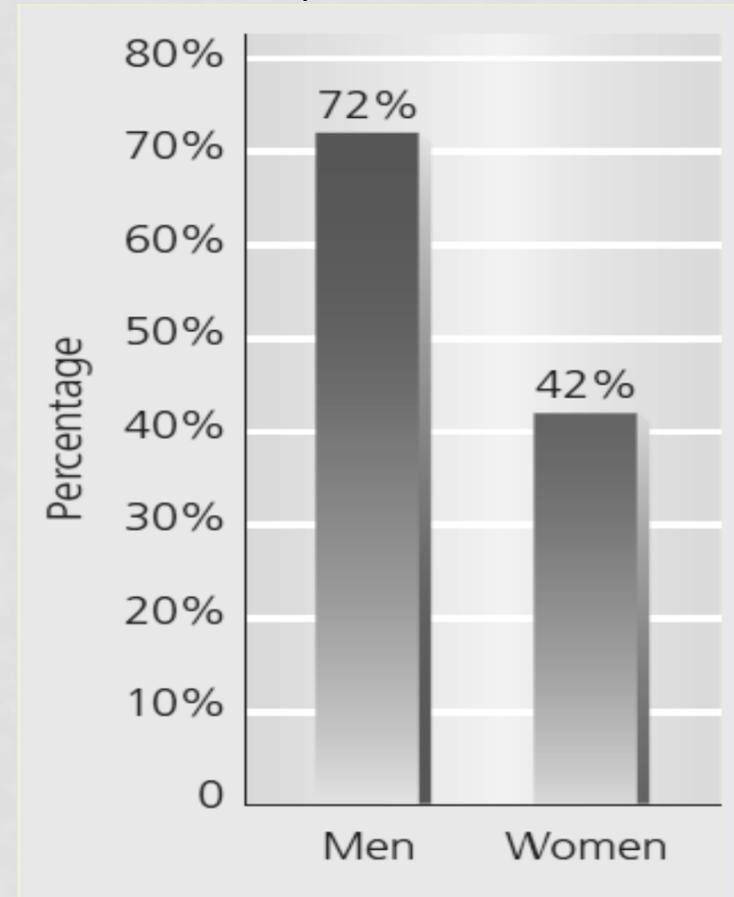


Transitions and Problems of Aging: Social Isolation

Of those who have ever married, who is widowed?



Which elderly live with a spouse?





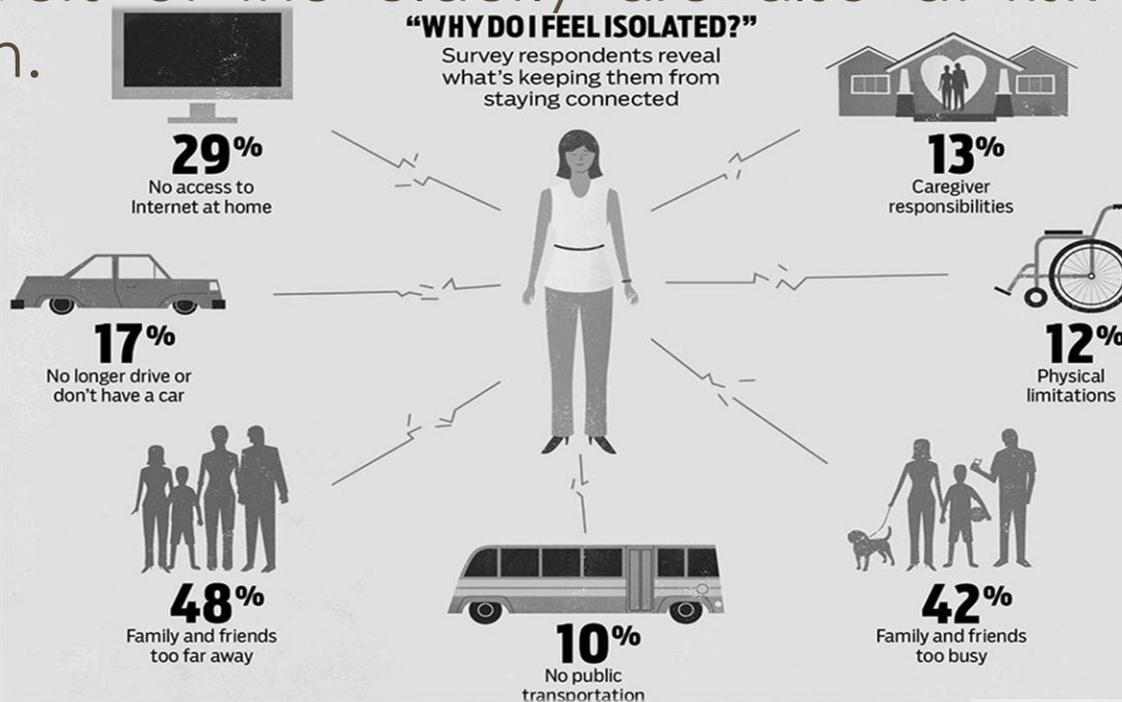
Transitions and Problems of Aging: Social Isolation

- Social isolation is a **health risk**, is linked to long-term illness and long-term care, and increases the risk of mortality.
- Isolated elderly more **pessimistic** about the future.
- Isolation makes elderly more **vulnerable to abuse**.
- Technology can help elderly isolation ... but not always.
- Group physical activity reduces elderly isolation.



Transitions and Problems of Aging: Social Isolation

- Research on interventions to deal with isolation is inconsistent and inconclusive. More is needed to identify how to reach older adults who are isolated.
- Caregivers of the elderly are also at risk for social isolation.





continued in
Social Stratification:
The Elderly Part II