

How the world looks when you're 80 years old

These are highlights of what the world looks like to the elderly, as revealed by Pastalan's Empathic Model.

Vision

- Glare is the most serious problem, either from uncontrolled natural light or from a single, intense source of artificial light. The former can be partially controlled by the use of polaroid lenses or by strategies architect might develop to cut down on glare caused by large glass windows. Tinted glass does not solve the problem, because it cuts the light level too much for aged eyes, nor does simply increasing the illumination, because this just adds to glare. The answer, at this stage, is to use several sources of light of different intensities and at varying distances from older readers, who at 80 need 3½ times as much light as they did at 20.

- All colors tend to fade, with red fading the least. Colors at the blue end of the spectrum fade most, and tend to merge into greens. Thus, the boundary between green carpeting and an ice blue wall is difficult to distinguish.

- Boundaries are also unstable when intensely contrasting colors are used next to each other. A hot red and vibrant green will seem to vibrate. Such colors used on a wall and adjacent staircase create a hazard for older people.

- Depth perception is affected, making it difficult for an older person to distinguish steps from risers on a staircase covered, say, with a busy floral print or if steps and risers are painted the same color.

- Ability to read fine visual detail falls off; as a result, older people have trouble reading names on mailboxes, doors and many kinds of directional signs.

Audition

- There is marked inability to hear clearly in such crowded places as restaurants and theaters or where there is background noise from appliances, air conditioning, TV or radios.

- Words or parts of words (and music) cannot be heard when they are above the 2,000-cycle frequency. Thus, difficulty with hearing is not only a matter of loudness, but also occurs with the higher frequency sounds.

- There is also difficulty in locating and identifying the source of sounds. Noises down the hall often seem to be coming from only a few feet away.

- Some combinations of carpeting, acoustical ceiling material and drapes make hearing clearly almost impossible.

Olfaction

- The taste of food diminishes to the point where they elderly may lose interest in eating. Some may suffer from malnutrition as a result.

- The richness of fragrance carried by such odors as kitchen smells falls off sharply.

Touch

- Problems occur with fine muscle control, so that dialing, opening of napkins and turning pages become difficult. So does identifying textures.

A profile of nursing home residents, taken from the 1978 book, *Too Old—Too Sick—Too Bad*:

Old — Average age 82, 70% over 70.

Female — 75%

Status — 10% living spouse, widowed 63%, single 22%, divorced 5%.

Alone — 55% have no close relative.

White — 96%, black 2%, other 2%

Come from — own home 66%, 31% from hospitals, 13% from other nursing homes.

Stay — average time 2 - 4 years.

Walking — less than 50%.

Disability — 55% mentally impaired, 30% incontinent.

Drugs — most on 4 - 7 different drugs daily.

Visitors — 68% have none.

Permanence — 20% return home; some to hospital; most die in nursing home.

(From *Christian Service Response of Detroit*)

Facts About the Aging

- By the year 2020, those over 65 will outnumber those under 25 in the United States.
- The numbers of older Americans will increase 100 percent in the next 30 years.
- The elderly pay more out-of-pocket health costs today than they did before Medicare existed. Only 46 percent of Americans under 65 have any health insurance whatsoever. And the largest cause of bankruptcies in the country today is exorbitant medical debts.
- Forty percent of the elderly who enter nursing homes are not sick. They simply have no place else to go.
- Every problem facing the aged is part of a larger social problem that Americans must solve together.

Gray Panthers Fact Sheet

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