A survey asks, how old is old? Respondents' answers were complicated.

by **Stacey Burling**, Updated: June 19, 2019- 5:00 AM

When is someone old?

This is a controversial question. Some people bristle at the mere mention of that loaded word: *old*. It is burdened with baggage — wrinkles, physical disability, dementia, grief, death — that have made a word about a whole, multi-faceted stage of life feel negative. It's not like being *young* is wonderful every day, but somehow that word has kept its rosy glow.

Nonetheless, Parker Health Group, Inc., a New Jersey company that provides aging services, including assisted living and memory care, decided to ask the question as part of an annual survey on attitudes about aging. The answers were complicated and, not surprisingly, varied considerably with the age of the 1,006 respondents. They were asked to pick one decade where they considered people old.

When all ages were included, 51 percent of the adults surveyed said you're old by the time you're in your 70s. Forty-six percent drew the line at 80. Women were considerably more likely than men to say old starts in your 80s. Men were more likely than women to say you're old in your 40s and 50s. Nearly a fifth of millennials and Gen Xers said people start being old in their 40s, but 62 percent of baby boomers and members of the silent generation put the "old" cutoff at 80 and above.

This is the third year the nonprofit organization has done the survey as part of an effort to shed light on ageism and promote a more nuanced and individualized view of aging. Donna Silbert, Parker's

chief strategy officer, said the company's goal is to "educate and move and alter how people view aging, not as a negative but just as a part of life."

Silbert, 59, sidestepped questions about when she thinks people are old. "What we want to do is make sure that there's not a stigma of 'I'm old when I'm 70' or 'I'm old when I'm 80,'" she said. "No matter what age I am, I can live my life to the fullest."

While ageism usually implies discrimination against older people, more who took the poll — 19 percent — said they'd faced discrimination at work because they were too *young* than because they were too old — 11 percent.

That question, Silbert said, was prompted by a young administrator's comments. It's important, she said, because the industry needs to recruit and encourage young employees. Ageism, she said, "is not OK anywhere."

People under age 55 were generally more optimistic than their elders about what an 80-year-old could accomplish. Almost everyone thought it was still possible to find love. Eighty percent of the younger group thought an 80-year-old could run a marathon. Only about 63 percent of older people agreed. A slightly lower percentage of older respondents endorsed getting a tattoo at 80. About three-quarters of millennials and Gen Xer's thought that was OK.

When asked what was the most positive thing about getting older, gaining experience and wisdom got the most votes, followed by spending more time with family and friends and, at a distant third, embracing a new life chapter.

The top three fears about aging were physical and mental health issues and running out of money. Some were also worried about being lonely or bored.

Parker presented people with a list of examples that it considered ageist, including, calling minor forgetfulness a "senior moment," a job pitch advertising for someone to join a "young dynamic team of individuals," birthday cards that make fun of getting old and dressing up as 100-year-olds on the 100th day of school. Forty percent of survey takers thought senior moments were ageist but only 30 percent saw a problem with wanting a young team. Less than 20 percent were concerned about cards or 100-day celebrations.