

Detroit Free Press

Mitch Albom: Suicide spikes amongst our oldest. Are we making matters worse?



Mitch Albom

Detroit Free Press

Published 12:00 a.m. ET Dec. 3, 2023 | Updated 7:51 a.m. ET Dec. 3, 2023

In their hysterical comedy routine from many years ago, Carl Reiner asks Mel Brooks — who is playing the part of a 2,000-year-old man — the secret to his long life.

“Will to live,” Brooks answers.

“Ah, yes,” Reiner replies. “The will to live —”

“Not THE will to live,” Brooks shouts. “DOCTOR ToLive. Doctor William TOLIVE! The man’s a genius!”

If only it were that easy.

Suicides in the U.S. reached an all-time high last year. Did you know that? And what group led the way? What category of Americans most lost their will to live?

Perhaps you guessed young people — as I did. Perhaps you figured the alienation of teenage and college years, the grim bullying of social media, and wars, economy and climate change all might contribute to some young people feeling they can’t go on with life, right?

Wrong.

The suicide numbers have actually gone *down* when it comes to teenagers and young adults.

The group that leads the way?

Old men. Particularly old white men. If that sounds like a pejorative — old white men — well, perhaps that's part of the problem.

Why are we doing this to our seniors?

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate for men over 75 was about twice as high as for men between 15-24. Men 85 and older had the highest rate of all ages.

And elderly white males had the highest percentage of any ethnic and gender group.

Shouldn't we be curious about that?

Experts have spent time analyzing the data. Some suggest that older white males lack the coping mechanisms for dealing with declining health. Some claim older white men are more used to keeping their feelings hidden about such things.

Some point to the fact that the majority of American suicides are by firearm, and older white men are more likely than other groups to have guns and be willing to use them.

All these factors are likely true to some degree. But what I'm not reading in these explanations is anything about how American society treats its elderly.

And I think we're missing something important.

In her noted book, "Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long & Well You Will Live," Dr. Rebecca Levy makes notable

comparisons between how old people are treated in America versus how they are treated in Japan, where longevity is amongst the highest in the world.

In Japan, she points out, to be old is an honor. The elderly are celebrated — and not just with excessive candles on a birthday cake. They are honored. Revered. Their wisdom is welcomed. There is even a national holiday that translates to “Respect for the Aged Day.” Old people are encouraged to contribute, to make art, to be physically fit, to fall in love.



Compare that to America, where youth is worshipped and aging is something to fight as long as possible. Hide wrinkles. Hide gray hair. Seek treatments and surgeries to disguise your advancing years. Act young. Use social media. Listen to today's music.

It's no surprise that in the movie “Barbie,” the moment that caught many critics' attention was when the gorgeous doll that is eternally young enters the real world and, for the first time, sees an old woman whose face is wrinkled.

“You're beautiful,” young Barbie says, gawking.

The director was making a statement.

Unless it's your own grandparents — for which everyone seems to make an exception — we treat the elderly in America with indifference or intolerance. We complain that they slow things down. We joke that they can't keep up with technology. We all but ignore them with advertising and programming. We mock them with expressions like “OK, Boomer” or “Get Off My Lawn Guy.”

And we use the phrase “old white men” as an insult.

No wonder some slow-moving, 85-year-old American males don't feel very hopeful about their place in society.

How we *all* could help

There is a definite connection between how a society treats its members and how they feel about themselves. As Levy writes: “In study after study ... I found that older people with more positive perceptions of aging performed better (on tests); were more likely to recover from severe disability; they remembered better; they walked faster, and they even lived longer.”

In other words, if you feel your culture values you, you are more likely to value yourself. And the more positively you feel about your aging, the longer you are likely to live.

So perhaps we should reevaluate how we treat elderly people in this country. We should eliminate mocking portraits of doddering old men and women as swiftly as we now eliminate stereotypes of Black people, Asian people or LGBTQ+ people.

We should consider phrases that insult older people — like “old white men” — as hateful as those that insult ethnic or gender groups.

And we should find ways to honor our elderly that don't feel condescending, forced or pathetic. To do that, we have to believe in our hearts that growing old is a gift, and that our senior years are something to aspire to, not avoid.

Mel Brooks had it right. It's will to live that will keep you going. But the "doctor" has to be inside us, and his prescription has to be hope. We would all rally to save the lives of our youngest citizens. Why shouldn't we do the same for our oldest?

Contact Mitch Albom: malbom@freepress.com. Check out the latest updates with his charities, books and events at MitchAlbom.com. Follow him [@mitchalbom](https://twitter.com/mitchalbom).

Suicide prevention help

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, you can contact 988 Lifeline by calling or texting 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. You also can call 911, go to the nearest emergency room. The National Institute of Mental Health, a federal agency, also notes warning signs and risk factors.