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The Changing Life Course

We are living longer…and healthier.

Over the last century, we have added over 30 years to the average Australian lifespan, which os more than in all previous millennia combined.

And it continues. Over the past decade, life expectancy increased by approximately 1.0 year for males and 0.8 years for females.

Health-adjusted life expectancy (HALE), which accounts for years lived in full health, also shows ongoing gradual improvement over the years.

In 2024, men of 60 could expect another 24.2 years (to 84.2) and women of 60 could expect another 27.1 years (to 87.1). And the number of people over 100 are growing dramatically:

Australia sits somewhere between number 4 and number 10 in the world for longevity (depending on the data source).

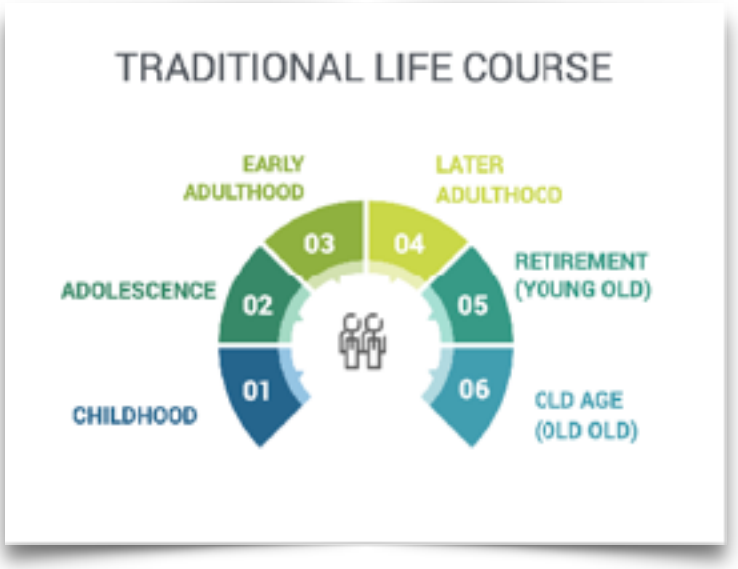
This is being called the ‘longevity bonus’ because it is a terrific boost for individuals, the economy and our society. It has a measurable impact on the way we look at older people, the services we make available and the opportunities they have to participate in society.

It has also contributed to the considerable disruption that has occurred and is continuing in the traditional stages and pathways in life.

What will you do with your extra 30 years?

The Traditional Life Course…

The life course used to have a predictable trajectory up to a high point in midlife then a long slow decline through retirement to a wooden box in the local cemetery. Personal growth was not expected later in life and your world shrank year by year.



Another way of looking at this is to track the major phases of public life – study, work, rest/retirement – and those in your private sphere. In the old days, you studied, then you worked, then you retired – it was a one-way linear progression. And in the rest of life you grew up, dated, married and had a family, aged and then died. All one way, no repeats or twists. It looked like this:

The Life Course is Changing…

When it first became clear that more and more years were being added to the lifespan through the 20th century, the first idea was to add them to retirement (remember the push to early retirement, leisure communities and endless golf/ bingo/cruises)? It was a clumsy idea, and makes a clumsy diagram:

These days, although the major elements are much the same, it's not as linear – we move back and forth through the phases of work and private life, mix them up, leave one out, delay another, revisit some…

Now it looks much more like this next diagram – where the potential for growth, adventure and achievement continues to rise until well into the 80s and maybe more (research clearly shows age 80+ is the average peak for life happiness):

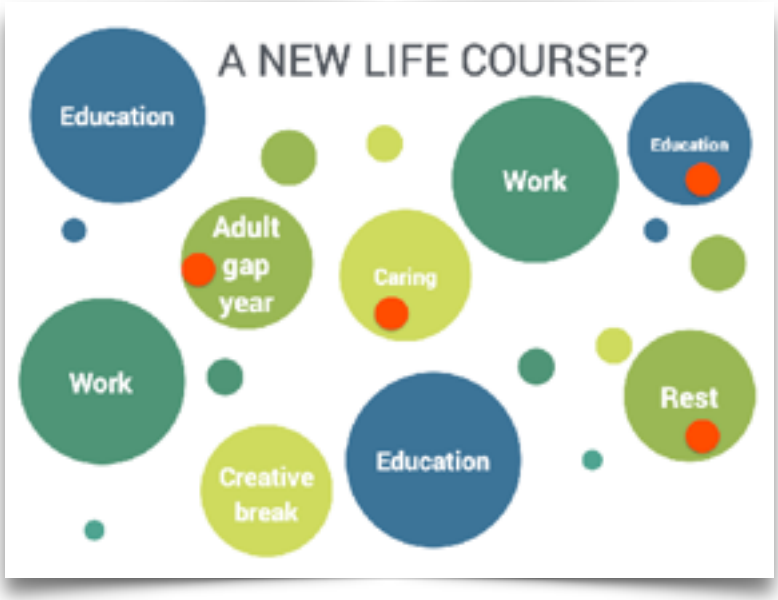
The key principles in this kind of life course are:

- Narrate your own life meaning
- Explore wider possibilities and lifelong learning
- Focus on relationships and social connections

Much more fun, more possibilities and more flexibility to create a life that you actually want to live!

What would you think about changing - or adding - in your life course if it looked like this?

Where to next?



Who knows, in a 100 year life, how should we as a society or you as an individual make a sense of the life course?

Might you take a year off every 7? Retrain completely in the middle? Go part time in the child-raising years?

Here, choice is much more up to you…

There are particular implications - good and bad - for older Australians.

The changing life course - marked by delayed retirement, non-linear careers, evolving family structures, and precarious housing pathways = presents both challenges and opportunities for older Australians. These shifts disrupt traditional expectations of stable homeownership and linear transitions into retirement, affecting health, finances, and social ties.

Much is written on the challenges we face today, but there are opportunities as well. A changing life course offers older Australians extended healthy years, flexible work options, and avenues for ongoing contribution amid longer lifespans and delayed retirement. These shifts enable purposeful engagement through learning, volunteering, and phased transitions rather than abrupt exits.

Self reflection will be important - as will be the ability to do multi stage life planning. Networks, friendships and mentoring will all be critical.

Of course, not all of us will be keen, and there are challenges in the current rigidity and exceptions in the social, economic, workplace and healthcare systems.

It may be pie in the sky thinking, but it is time we had a public conversation on this.

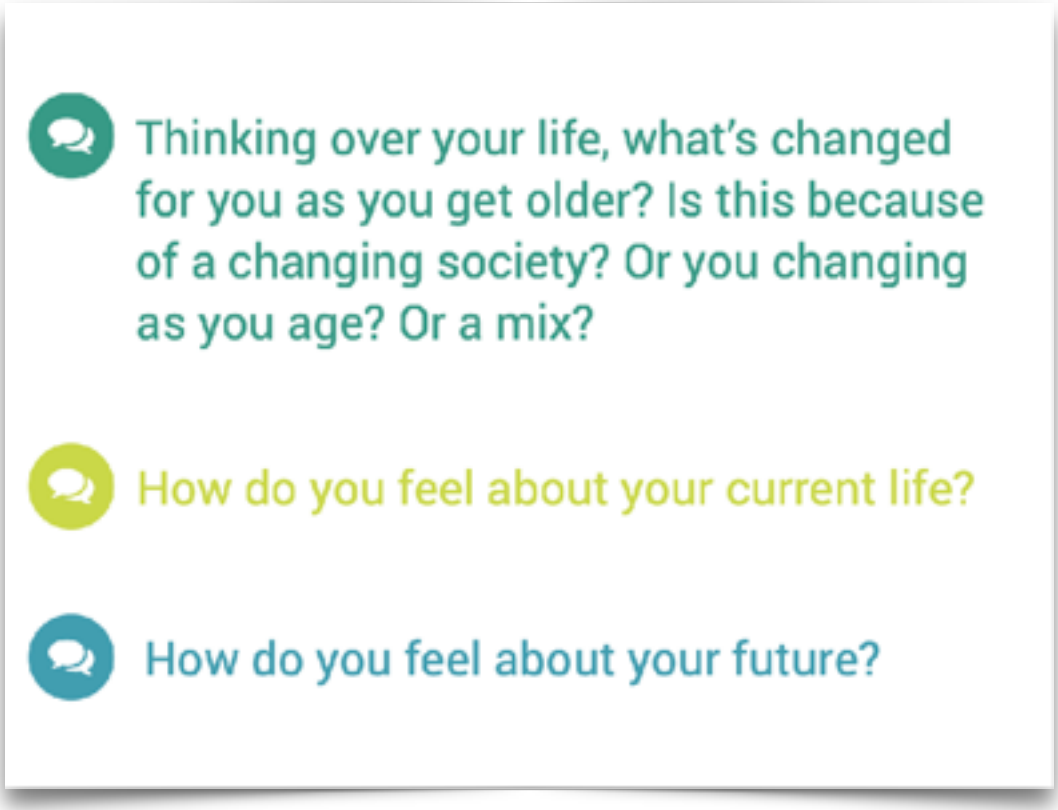
What are the most important aspects of the changing life course we need to discuss as a society?

What do you think?

Looking over the material above, have a think about the bits that resonate with you. It might be interesting for you to reflect on finding a more flexible life course, or understanding that you have options that don't fit into a traditional old-style life course.

Is there one small thing you could do to further this? Do a bit of research, talk about an idea with a friend, explore a new hobby, anything that sounds interesting to you…

And here are some bigger questions to reflect on, if that's your thing…



I hope you have found this free resource interesting.

If you are interested in occasional blogposts about getting older, Aussie style, please sign up for my newsletter on my website, where you'll also find more free downloads and other information.

I run workshops from time to time and am happy to come and talk to your community group about flourishing as you age.

joannamaxwell.com.au

joanna@joannamaxwell.com.au