



# imagining our futures

## community report

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Aging Activisms Research Collective  
[www.agingactivisms.org](http://www.agingactivisms.org)

# introduction

“If we make changes now, even though it costs more, it’s going to benefit more people in the end. We may not see the changes that we make but somebody will benefit from it one day”

- Andrea Dodsworth, constituency assistant and disability advocate

Imagining our Futures was an intergenerational research workshop hosted on October 18-19, 2019, by Aging Activisms, a research program led by May Chazan at Trent University. This workshop invited participants of varied ages (20s through 70s) to join in group discussion and art making in order to explore questions of aging futures in Peterborough, Ontario, on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory. It was carried out as a follow-up activity to Aging Activisms’ storytelling research (2016-2022), which seeks to challenge restricting ideas about aging as decline, and assumptions that successful futures are limited to able-bodied, able-minded, heterosexual, wealthy, white people (see: [www.agingactivisms.org](http://www.agingactivisms.org)).

Imagining Our Futures invited participants to explore, through circle conversations, collage-making, and creating a collective art installation of the Odenabe Ziibi (Otonabee river), the following questions:

- What would make this community a good place to grow old(er)?
- What would make this community age-friendly?
- What would you need to enjoy a positive future in this community?
- Are you thinking about aging futures in the context of climate crisis and/or environmental, societal, or economic transition? If so, how?
- What does a just, fair, equitable future look like in Nogojiwanong?
- Where might we look for leadership, vision, and imagination toward the transformation we want?

As a diverse group of social changers, community organizers, artists, and scholars, we imagined complex and transformative futures, thinking about “age-friendliness” for many generations to come. In what follows, we offer key insights from these conversations around four themes: aging well on a struggling Earth; ending racism, ableism, homophobia, and poverty as an “age-friendly” strategy; intergenerational aging and continuance; and reworlding aging futures.

## key take-home messages

Building “Age-friendly” futures requires:

- **Connecting meaningfully across sectors:** Age-friendly planning should always be integrated with interconnected issues, such as white supremacy and climate change.
- **Actively combatting racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, capitalism, colonialism, and classism:** Ageism is not the only ‘ism’ shaping older adults’ lives, experiences, and access to services.
- **Systemic and ideological transformation:** No community is “Age-friendly” until it is age-friendly for all, and this requires a cultural shift.

- **Everyday practices of *reworlding* aging futures:** We make futures (and transform systems) in the present with our actions and relationships—big and small.
- ***Interdependence:*** An “age-friendly” community does not require all to manage their aging independently, but rather to build networks of interdependence.
- **Listening to many different voices:** These kinds of conversations—about aging futures, with many different voices—are themselves a *reworlding* practice worth investing in.

## aging well on a struggling Earth

“We are made up of water, so to me, it’s not only something that grounds me, but I feel it’s what connects us, and I wish more of us had the opportunity to spend time by the river and connect to her spirit.”  
— Joëlle Favreau, manager of Nourish Peterborough

Every participant grounded their visions of positive and just aging futures in the wellbeing of the Earth, the land, the water. For this group, then, any possibilities of “age-friendly” futures are inseparable from **ecological sustainability**. Participants emphasized sustainability both in thinking about their own aging futures—highlighting spending time outside, with the river, gardening, and more as key to fostering connection, purpose, and energy—and in visioning towards the aging of those yet to come. They discussed the need for future generations to have fresh water, clean air, healthy lands, and sustainable foods. As participants expressed, **a struggling planet cannot be “age-friendly.”**

As part of ecologically healthy futures, participants raised **food insecurity** as an issue for all ages. They noted that many older, low-income community members are food insecure, meaning they do not have consistent, safe, and dependable access to food, especially nutritionally-rich, locally farmed foods. Participants envisioned futures with an abundance of healthy, affordable foods, which could be shared in community.

In thinking about the current climate crisis, participants shared the urgency of valuing **Indigenous knowledges and leadership**, in order to learn from those who have the most longstanding and reciprocal relationships with the land, water, foods, and plants of this Michi Saagiig territory. Condemning the ways in which colonial and capitalist greed have fueled ecological crisis through unsustainable and harmful extraction, they agreed that major transformation is necessary to preserve a livable earth so that people of all ages, and those not yet born, can have positive aging futures.



## ending racism, ableism, homophobia, and poverty as an ‘age friendly’ strategy

“A just future doesn’t look like transphobia, or ableism, or white supremacy, or any of the other systems of oppression that operate and operate together.”

Participants raised **age segregation, physical accessibility, wealth inequality, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, and racism** as barriers to positive aging futures in this community. Participants explored how many kinds of bodies – such as disabled, racialized, Indigenous, queer bodies – are erased from our images and understandings of what it means to age, and what is needed to age well in community.

“**Whose aging are we thinking about?**” was a recurring question throughout our conversations. Participants explained that aging services in Peterborough are not designed for racialized, Indigenous, or LGBTQ2IA+ seniors, or for those experiencing poverty and/or homelessness, even if these programs claim to be universal, accessible, and inclusive. Some cited instances of experiencing racism or homophobia while accessing services. Participants noted that aging initiatives, care services, and seniors’ programming cannot be meaningfully “age-friendly” until they are accessible to all. Participants raised the need for more **accessible service structures and processes**, with a lot more support, care, knowledge-sharing, and advocacy throughout. They stressed that these **services must be cost-free**, with service providers who have had anti-racist, LGBTQ2IA+ friendly, anti-oppression training.

Several participants promoted a **guaranteed minimum income** as one practical and immediate way to address income disparities, precarious housing, and food insecurity. They noted that a guaranteed minimum income could also support communities of care, by paying for and valuing the informal care that takes place through various relationships. Participants of all ages also voiced a desire for more **collective, intergenerational, and subsidized housing options**. They expressed that **poverty reduction must factor into envisioning Peterborough as an accessible and age-friendly community**.

Participants explained that short-term changes to existing services are only made meaningful alongside longer-term commitment to transforming the inequitable structures that influence and shape those services. Participants tied practical issues of aging to these larger systems, speaking to the way aging persons in care tend to be isolated and separated from the community, and drew an important link between this trend, and colonial and capitalist ideas about human worth. Namely, that our worth is tied to what we do to our productivity and what we contribute to the economy. Participants were clear that, while short-term changes can make an impact, issues of inequity will nonetheless persist without **meaningful and deep systemic transformation**.



## intergenerational aging & continuance

“Everyone is talking about these intergenerational relationships: where we come together across our differences in ways that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal. What I’ve found is, when those kinds of relationships happen, we actually start to experience safety, and [we are] less likely to feel isolated.”

-- Madeline Whetung, PhD Candidate and member of Curve Lake First Nation

Participants’ visions of an ‘age friendly’ community were not isolated to older adults – in fact, they argued for shifting towards thinking about **aging as a process that happens throughout the lifecourse**; towards intergenerational connection as vital; towards demystifying and de-institutionalizing different life stages, including birth and death; and towards thinking about aging in a less finite, less linear, and more circular way, which would also mean recognizing that we are always becoming future ancestors. Our conversations also challenged how we often frame “aging well”, or “active aging”, as an individual responsibility and the result of individual action, which obscures our **collective responsibilities and relationships** to one another as we age together in community across generations, and which also omits the responsibilities we have to act now to ensure a **liveable life for future generations**.

Participants of all ages also discussed the lack of **safe, accessible, intergenerational, and free spaces to gather** indoors, share food together, create together, and support one another, raising this as an important concern for positive aging in this community. They noted how most services and programming related to aging tend not to be intergenerational, which often isolates older community members. Participants reflected on how they understand being “age-friendly” to mean thinking about connecting, gathering, sharing in community across the lifecourse, pointing to how intergenerational relationships are key to feeling connected, safe, and joyful, and to learning, creating, and growing together.

## reworlding aging futures

“We need to shift the way that we value things in dominant culture: things like money, and this intense focus on independence just seem to be things that we really need to be placing less value on, in favour of community, life, care, and support.”

- Jillian Ackert, MA student and local artist

As participants noted that no community can be “age-friendly” without actively dismantling racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, colonialism, capitalism, classism, and other systems of oppression, they turned the conversation towards imagining what the dismantling of these systems, and (re)creating of alternative ones, would look like. Our conversations were often centred around the **large-scale ideological shifts** – shifts in our thinking and *imagining* - that would be needed to create the kinds of aging futures we envision. Participants called for shifting away from valuing independence and towards valuing interdependence, and suggested that planning for aging is connected to other issues like food security, climate change, decolonization, and so on.



Importantly, this discussion moved quickly beyond the abstract. We explored how these big changes can happen through seemingly small everyday actions, or **practices of reworlding**. Participants explored how to create better aging futures through immediate, material practices that we all can do now, and which can be supported through existing structure – from seed saving to telling stories across generations, from sharing more meals together to saying our thanks to the water, from fixing curb-cuts to being imaginative with children. As Joëlle Favreau said, “I was thinking that seeds are little pieces that seem like nothing, but you can grow into those huge trees or plants – it’s one little practice that can grow and lead to cultural revolution.”

## conclusions

“Where there’s a lot of people, there should be plenty of food, help with life, plenty of friends, plenty of laughter, and plenty of rest... people smiling and laughing, and of course food, and a dream home... a home to call my own”

- Monica Thompson, community member

Overall, participants of all ages envisioned age-friendliness well beyond their own lifetimes, instead reaching their visions far into the future for the generations to come, while also reflecting practically on the issues they experience in their day-to-day lives. What this research points to is a **re-visioning of what is meant by ‘age-friendly’ and ‘aging futures.’** Participants asked us to shift this discussion beyond conventional themes of inclusion, access, and service provision, to also (and perhaps most importantly) understand that **aging well requires a level of ecological sustainability and social justice that goes beyond any particular age-friendly initiative.** This might, at first, seem overwhelming or impossible. However, we take these discussions as brimming with possibilities for those advocating for age-friendly policies and planning to meaningfully participate in transforming our community.

### Revisiting what building “age-friendly” futures requires:

- **Connecting across sectors:** As an ‘issue,’ older adults’ experiences of aging cannot be separated from the ‘issues’ of poverty, environmental sustainability, food security, intergenerational connection, racism, colonialism, ableism, accessibility, and more. Age-friendly planning, then, requires meaningfully connecting sectors.
- **Actively combatting racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, capitalism, colonialism, and classism:** Improving accessibility means complete physical accessibility, simpler and more user-friendly services, holding intergenerational connection at the core, and combatting racism, classism, homophobia, and so on throughout all services, which would include anti-oppression training for all staff and volunteers.



- **Systemic and ideological transformation:** Inequitable aging futures are not “age-friendly” futures. “Age friendly” work is also the work of dismantling capitalism and colonialism; of valuing care, bodies, earth, water, and relationships with all of creation above money, power, security, property, etc. This requires a major ideological shift, boundless imagination, and implementing some key structures. At the city level, for instance, a guaranteed basic income program would be a way to begin to foster significant transformation.
- **Everyday practices of reworlding aging futures:** Small interventions practiced immediately offer *reworlding* potential; that is, we can make worlds we want and need to support aging into the future now, while we also work on systems changes. We make futures in the present with our actions. Participants suggested these reworlding practices: **intergenerational seed-saving projects, cooking and eating together, reclaiming public spaces**, communal gardening, intergenerational storytelling, neighbourhood collectives. We envisioned **creating connection**—to one another, to the water, to the land, to the non-human beings—as a practice of reworlding positive futures, directly resisting the individualism and commoditization of capitalism.
- **Interdependence:** Interdependence, and not independence, is worth striving for as a community. Being dependent on others, and having others depend on you, is not a sign of a failure to “age well,” but rather a sign of a positive, radically relational community. Prizing independence is capitalist thinking, and it divides us.
- **Listening to many different voices:** Participants reflected on the importance of bringing more voices across difference into conversations about what would make Peterborough a good place to grow older. Participants reflected that the services, policies, and programs that exist sometimes assume that what works for middle class, white, heterosexual, and coupled older people will work for everyone, which is certainly not the case. They called for aging services in Peterborough to meaningfully listen to, and learn from, all kinds of voices, and to plan and create policies that support the reworlding wisdom already underway in our community.

## thanks

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