Emily Evans

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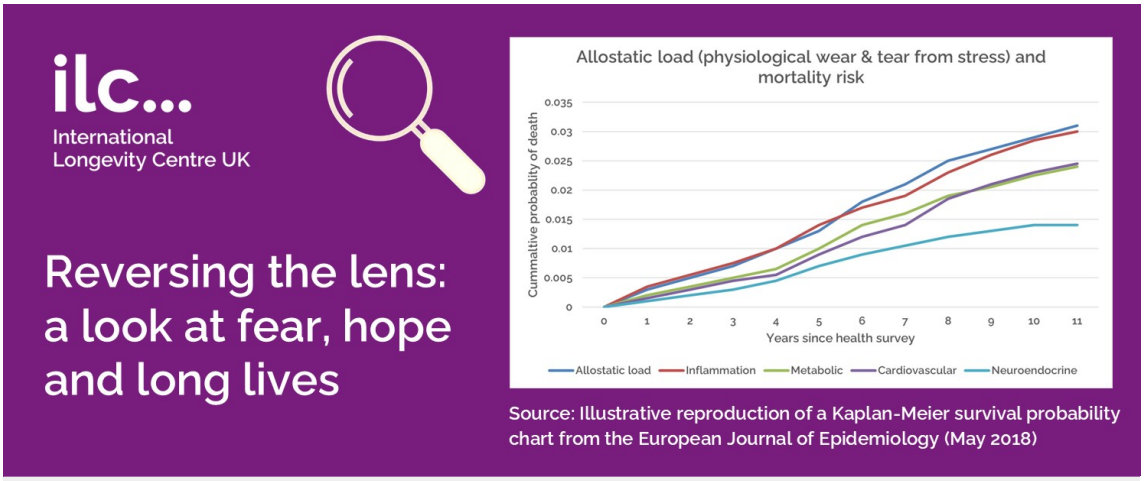
International Longevity Centre UK

Latest news

ILC Friday three

- Reversing the lens - a look at fear, hope and long lives
- Sweet dreams - why good sleep matters for healthy ageing
- ILC wrapped - some top highlights of 2025

Reversing the lens – a look at fear, hope and long lives



Source: Illustrative reproduction of a Kaplan-Meier survival probability chart from the European Journal of Epidemiology (May 2018)

Much of the ILC's work, and the wider debate about long lives, understandably centres on health care, pensions and lifestyles. What we tend to shy away from are the harder-to-measure, more uncomfortable emotions – particularly fear. Not fear as a single moment or event, but as a persistent backdrop shaping how people live,

behave and age. In 2025, many of us have experienced several overlapping fears at once: economic insecurity, fear of crime and violence, worries about health and care, climate anxiety and a wider sense of global instability. And a closer look at the available evidence suggests this matters for long lives at a population level.

The research evidence rarely talks about “fear” in isolation. Instead, large cohort studies – such as analysis of data from the US National Health Interview Survey – measure psychological distress, perceived stress or feelings of safety and control. Across countries and cohorts, the pattern is consistent: people reporting higher levels of ongoing distress face a higher risk of earlier death. The more anxiety and strain people feel, the higher their risk of dying earlier – even when their distress is not severe enough to be diagnosed as a mental illness. Fear and insecurity are therefore not marginal issues – they shape outcomes across whole populations.

One of the clearest insights from the evidence is that chronic exposure does the damage. Living for long periods with uncertainty, threat or low control creates cumulative “wear and tear” on the body, often described as allostatic load. This affects stress hormones, blood pressure, inflammation and metabolic function. Over time, these changes increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and other conditions that drive gaps in life expectancy between places and groups.

Place matters too. Feeling unsafe can restrict everyday behaviours – walking, socialising, using public space – undermining physical activity, social connection and mental wellbeing. Economic insecurity is particularly powerful. Job loss, financial strain and insecure work are consistently linked to worse health and higher mortality risk. These fears often cluster, reinforcing disadvantage across the life course.

But 2025 has not been only a year of fear. From the promise of medical breakthroughs to the shared joys of nature, music and sport, it has also been a year of hope and moments of light. In his love letter to Anne Elliot in Persuasion, Captain Wentworth wrote, “I am half agony, half hope” – a line that feels especially resonant in this, the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen’s birth. That mixture of anxiety and optimism perhaps sums up the resilience and strength of humanity that has kept us all going this year.

There is also research evidence showing that hope and psychological wellbeing can protect our health. Hope is not about pretending everything is fine – it is about feeling you have some control, a sense of purpose and a belief that there are ways forward. Longitudinal studies suggest that people who feel more hopeful about the future tend to experience better health, wellbeing and life outcomes over time. Hope is associated with healthier behaviours, coping better with stress and stronger social connections, all of which matter for long lives. While the links are complex and not always straightforward cause and effect, the pattern across studies is strikingly consistent.

This means there are two clear lessons for policy on longer lives. Reducing fear means improving the conditions that give people security and control: stable incomes, safe and accessible neighbourhoods, trustworthy services and social connection at every age. Cultivating hope means ensuring people can imagine a future worth planning for. Better long lives are about creating societies where those years are lived with less fear – and with something, always, to hope for.

READ MORE

Sweet dreams – why good sleep matters for healthy ageing

Age group	Age range	Recommended hours of sleep
Infant	4-12 months	12-16 hours (including naps)
Toddler	1-2 years	11-14 hours (including naps)
Preschool	3-5 years	10-13 hours (including naps)
School-age	6-12 years	9-12 hours
Teen	13-18 years	8-10 hours
Adult	18 years and older	7 hours or more

Source: American Academy of Sleep Medicine, via the Sleep Foundation website

How well do you sleep? Are you getting enough?

Find out more at our webinar with the University of Surrey's Centre for Excellence on Ageing on Thursday 15 January 2026 from 12.00pm to 1.00pm

There is nothing quite like waking up refreshed after a good night's sleep. For many of us, getting to bed at a reasonable time and clocking around eight hours feels like a small but meaningful achievement. Ahead of the ILC's Partners Programme webinar early next year, ILC's Head of Partnerships and External Relations, Patrick Swain, explores the link between sleep and longevity, and why getting enough sleep is important to live well for longer.

But sleep is not straightforward for everyone. Some people struggle with disrupted patterns, others have their sleep interrupted by noise or light, and many work unsociable hours that require sleeping during the day. No two nights' sleep are the same. What is consistent, however, is that good quality sleep is fundamental to ageing well and living better for longer.

Poor sleep and sleep deprivation are linked to a higher risk of Alzheimer's disease, metabolic conditions such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular events and poorer mental health. In the UK, it is estimated that the public misses out on the equivalent of a full night's sleep every week, with 16% of adults getting fewer than six hours a night. This matters because sleep duration tends to decline with age by around ten minutes per decade, increasing the risk of multiple long-term conditions as people grow older.

In an ageing society, addressing inequalities in sleep is therefore essential. We spend roughly a third of our lives asleep, meaning sleep plays a central role in shaping health across the life course. Guidance from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine highlights that sleep needs change with age – from up to 16 hours a day in infancy to at least seven hours for adults. These recommendations underline how crucial sleep is in our early and mid-life years, laying foundations for later life health.

Importantly, emerging evidence suggests that how we sleep may matter as much as how long. A 2024 study found that sleep regularity was a stronger predictor of all-cause mortality than sleep duration. People with the most regular sleep patterns had a 20%–48% lower risk of death from any cause compared with the most irregular sleepers. Consistency, it seems, is key.

Yet regular sleep is not achievable for everyone. Office for National Statistics data shows that just over one in four UK employees work at night and, as our work in Greater Manchester suggests, in some parts of the country, nearly a third of the local workforce are employed in the night-time economy. This means a significant proportion of the workforce may struggle to maintain regular or sufficient sleep, with potential long-term consequences for health. These challenges demand greater attention from employers and occupational health services if we are serious about supporting longer, healthier working lives.

Sleep conditions also play a major role. Millions of people in the UK live with insomnia, sleep apnoea or narcolepsy, and an estimated 14 million adults may have an undiagnosed sleep disorder. As ILC's former Head of Projects, Kate Pierpoint, has previously explored, addressing insomnia and related conditions is critical for improving quality of life.

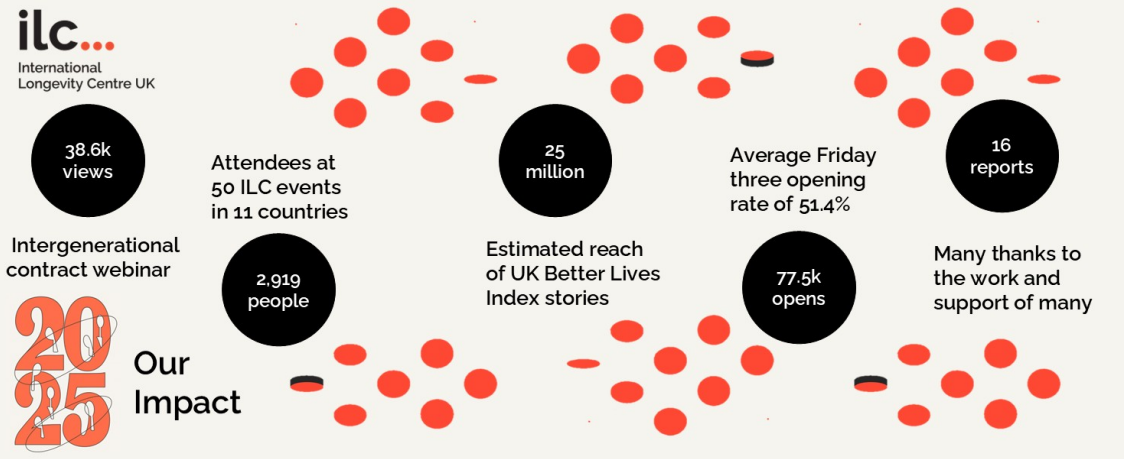
Sleeping well is about far more than turning out the light. Our environment, physical and mental health, work patterns and socioeconomic circumstances all shape sleep quality. Tackling these factors together is essential if everyone is to have the opportunity to age well.

Through its partnership with the University of Surrey's Centre of Excellence on Ageing, ILC is hosting a webinar on 15 January 2026 exploring the links between sleep and healthy ageing. Professor Derk-Jan Dijk and fellow panellists will unpack common misconceptions and examine what good sleep really means for living well for longer.

You can read more in Patrick Swain's blog here and find out more about ILC's Partners Programme here. And please register for the lunchtime webinar on **Thursday 15 January 2026** via the button below.

REGISTER HERE

ILC wrapped – some top highlights of 2025



For this final edition of the ILC newsletter in 2025, we thought we'd once again borrow the format from a certain music streaming company.

Firstly, thank you for your loyal readership. In 2025, we're proud to report an average 51.4% opening rate for our Friday three newsletter – an improvement on last year's 49% average opening rate. While it's never a competition, this compares favourably with the 42.4% average open rate across all industries and 46.5% for charities.

Some of you will have joined us at one or more of the 50 events we held in 11 different countries, attended by 2,919 people. These included an event with the British Embassy in Slovakia – a first for the ILC.

Other top highlights included:

- Our Future of Ageing 2025, with Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, as the keynote speaker – and don't forget to take advantage of our early bird offer for Future of Ageing 2026.
- Being invited in both March and June to give oral evidence to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee inquiry into Preparing for an ageing society, and in December appearing before the Work and Pensions Committee as part of its inquiry into the Transition to State Pension Age.
- An invitation to speak at the UN's Second World Summit on Social Development in Doha, Qatar, alongside heads of state and governments. This prestigious event was held 30 years after the first such summit in 1995. We also held back-to-back events around our Healthy Ageing and Prevention Index at the World Health Assembly in Geneva in May and at October's World Health Summit in Berlin – another first for the ILC – alongside numerous other global events from Denmark to South Africa.

We published 16 reports on topics ranging from building an age-friendly night-time economy in Greater Manchester to growing older with HIV, and we launched our new UK Better Lives Index supported by Edwards Lifesciences, the Hallmark Foundation and Pfizer.

We were involved in more podcasts this year than ever before, with members of the ILC team appearing on a range of shows including Brightwell's Pensions Unpacked and LCP's Beyond Curious, exploring the challenges and opportunities of longevity. Of special note, was David Sinclair's invitation as an expert to discuss dependency ratios, retirement and state pension age on the popular economics podcast More or Less with Tim Harford on BBC Radio 4.

At the start of the year, we held a webinar, supported by M&G, as part of our project, Strengthening the intergenerational contract, and streamed it via YouTube. It has since become ILC's most-viewed video since joining the platform in 2015 – a positively viral 38.6k views.

For a small organisation, we've again had a strong year in the media. Highlights included coverage of the ageism and stigma faced by older people seeking mental health support following publication of our Mind the age gap report, supported by Boehringer Ingelheim. The story generated extensive national, regional and international coverage, with an estimated potential reach of around 40 million people, driven by national reporting by the Press Association, in The Independent and widespread syndication across global digital news platforms.

Later in the year, The Times published the initial findings from the UK Better Lives Index. This reached an estimated 25 million people following pick-up across over 80 different national and regional media outlets. And the story engaged local and national politicians, including some who had not previously engaged with us – from the Member for Foyle in Northern Ireland, Sinead McLaughlin, to Victoria Atkins MP, former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Among team members who use Spotify, the average chronological age is 48, while the average "listening age" comes in at just 28. Spotify's new metric compares users' habits with those of others on the platform and assigns an age based on typical patterns – meaning our playlists resemble those of people two decades younger. It's a light-hearted reminder that attitudes and cultural tastes don't necessarily age in step with the calendar, and that technology can democratise experience. For those of us who spend our working lives challenging stereotypes about older – and younger – people, we'll happily take this finding and keep turning up the volume.

Overall, as for many others, 2025 has been a bit of a rollercoaster, but we're finishing the year on a roll and we're grateful to have you along for the journey. As a regular reader – which, if you've made it this far on what is for many the last working Friday of the year, you surely are – thank you for being one of our top fans.

The work we do would simply not be possible without the valuable support we receive from our funders, the members of ILC's Partners Programme, our Trustees, Insight Experts, Strategic Advisory Board, and our friends and colleagues – too many to list here, but you can find out more via the button below.

Very best wishes for the festive break, and we'll see you in the New Year.

MORE HERE

The Friday three newsletter, edited by Emily Evans, usually goes out fortnightly. However, the next edition is likely to be in the second week of January 2026.

To keep up-to-date with ILC events throughout the year, please continue to check our website on a regular basis.

Please follow us on social media via the links below for our latest news and event updates. Help support these events and our independent analysis. Donate to ILC here.

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