



Aging Gracefully — it is a choice!

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IN SOME CULTURES OF THE WORLD, aged individuals are honored and respected. They may be viewed as a repository of wisdom, authority, and leadership. However, our society tends to celebrate youth, while associating advanced age with limitation and loss. The media is constantly reminding us to defy the aging process by pursuing the latest supplements, cosmetics, and plastic surgeries. It is doubtful that anyone is particularly thrilled to receive their first AARP publication or “senior discount”!

One may also be tempted to assume that longevity is dictated solely by our genes. However, heredity is not destiny. Scientific studies of identical twins have demonstrated that only 25% of an individual’s longevity is determined by genetic factors, and 75% is the result of lifestyle choices. This suggests that we have a considerable amount of control over how well we age.

In his book *Chasing Life*, Sanjay Gupta, M.D. cites several studies which demonstrate that longevity is significantly increased by a positive self-perception of aging. Certainly, optimism leads to better lifestyle choices, as well as more meaningful relationships. A positive attitude also influences the body’s immune response, reducing levels of stress hormones and enhancing protection against disease.

Much has been learned about successful aging from the study of “Blue Zones.” These are geographic regions, throughout the world,

which boast clusters of long-lived individuals leading active and meaningful lives. In his book *Blue Zones*, Dan Buettner describes interviews with inhabitants of Okinawa; Sardinia; Costa Rica; the Greek island of Ikaria; and Loma Linda, California. In those areas outside the U.S., individuals are often involved in hard, physical work throughout their lifetime; walk many miles daily; and eat

importance of “giving back” to their families and communities.

In her book *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*, Joan Chittister discusses the many blessings which flow from a flexible and optimistic outlook. With great wisdom, she also describes the impediments to successful aging, noting that “regret is the quicksand of the soul.” Certainly, spiritual maturity necessitates forgiveness

of others, but it is also imperative to forgive oneself. Likewise, if we are to attain a peaceful heart, anger and bitterness must be cast by the wayside.

Clearly, aging is not without its challenges. Our body and mind gradually lose strength and agility. Loved ones die. Friends move away. However, as life slows down, we begin to realize the freedom to explore our true identity. We are no longer defined by a job title or societal expectations.

We may discover a depth of soul and spirit which could not be accessed in our previously hectic lives. Once our soul awakens, we become aware of those around us who are in need of love, generosity, and compassion. A reflective and positive attitude may better allow us to reach out to others, thus discovering the purpose and meaning within our own lives. A quote by the late Cardinal Francis George sums it up well: “*The only thing we take with us when we die, is what we have given away.*” ■

Rita Tranquilli, M.D., is a psychiatrist who enjoys working with adults in the pharmacologic management of emotional disorders. She is particularly interested in the interface of spirituality and medicine.



lean, plant-based diets. There is no word in the Okinawan dialect for “retirement”! The longevity of Loma Linda’s residents is attributed to the healthy lifestyle associated with their Seventh Day Adventist faith.

Although diet and exercise certainly play a role in longevity, spiritual and emotional factors are likely even more important determinants of one’s quality of life. The active centenarians interviewed by Buettner were all optimistic individuals and people of faith.

They had a strong sense of purpose, devotion to family, and maintained social connectedness. Time was set aside for reflection and spiritual practices. Many expressed a generosity of spirit, noting the



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Q&A

Q I am 70 years old and have never had the best memory, but lately I've become more forgetful. I've been forgetting names and misplacing things. Could this be the beginning of Alzheimer's Disease?

A Forgetfulness is a fairly common concern in healthy older adults. Some may notice problems with learning and memory as early as their late 50s and early 60s. Most of the reasons for the "forgetfulness" are related to trouble paying attention to and storing information, rather than with actual remembering. Although this is frustrating, it does not lead to progressive global deficits in memory and reasoning.

Alzheimer's Disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a neurodegenerative condition—a global cognitive decline that, in its earliest phase, may not be noticed by the individual or by family members. Later it may start to affect other areas of cognitive functioning and become more noticeable.

A formal evaluation by your primary care doctor or a neurologist may rule out certain reversible causes of memory decline, including depression, vitamin B-12 deficiency, alcohol abuse, medication side effects, and other conditions.

For people who are concerned about memory problems and who have a family history of Alzheimer's Disease, neuropsychological testing can also establish a baseline of current cognitive functioning for future comparison. ■

Daniel Wyma, M.D., works in the areas of general adult psychiatry, adolescent psychiatry, and neuropsychiatry.

Retirement as a New Beginning

MOST PEOPLE APPROACHING retirement dream of no longer having to deal with the hassles of work. In fact, many spend more time thinking about their financial portfolio and getting away from work than where they are going next in life.

Like a sprinter who is focussed on only reaching the finish line, many who are approaching retirement don't give much consideration to what lies beyond work. And so they soon discover that retirement without a solid plan leaves them feeling adrift.

Retirement is a major life transition that more than 70 million baby boomers will begin over the next 10 years. As with all life transitions, retirement requires both planning and flexibility.

Although there is no one right way to retire, there are a few key issues that need to be considered when approaching retirement age:

Determine if retirement is your best option: Many baby boomers are choosing to work beyond the normal retirement age because they either need to for financial reasons or want to because they derive a sense of fulfillment from their work. Your personal values, needs, and goals should be the determining factors.

Establish a sense of purpose: We all need a reason to get up in the morning. Retirees are no different. Without particular interests, goals, or a strong sense of purpose, it is too easy for a sense of ennui, if not depression, to set in.

Accept change: Retirement brings all kinds of changes, some of which are not easy to accept without having a flexible plan. In addition to lifestyle changes which require some sacrifices, there are equally challenging changes in identity and loss of control. "Who am I now that I am not working?"

Most experts advise people to start their retirement planning early and to remember that you are not only leaving a job, you are starting a new phase of life. ■

Jeffrey L. Santee, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with advanced training in cognitive psychology and behavioral medicine. In addition to his work in men's and marital issues, he specializes in the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders, and stress-related health problems.

Self-Care for Caregivers

IT'S NO LONGER UNUSUAL TO celebrate the birthdays of those turning 100 or older. And most of us are very grateful for this! With the benefits of longevity, though, come added concerns and the need to provide care for aging family members.

A recent estimate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is that adults now turning 65 will need an average of three years of long-term care, often in the home of family members for at least two of those years; and those caring for them will spend an average of 21 hours a week. While the rewards of these relationships can be great, it is important that caregivers also attend to their

own well-being in order to best enjoy those relationships.

SOME TIPS FOR SELF-CARE:

■ **Make sure you get enough sleep and exercise.** (Consult your doctor if sleep is difficult.)

■ **Pay attention to nutrition—** don't use unhealthy eating or drinking as "stress relief."

■ **Schedule times for relaxation and fun.** And laugh! Humor is a great stress reliever!

■ **Give time to other adult relationships,** especially your marriage, where you can find nurture and joy.

■ **If you have children at home, having fun with them,** not just serving their needs, will help nourish you as well.

■ **Take time for spiritual renewal through meditation, prayer, reading, and attending services.**

Not only does this give you a breather, it also can adjust

your perspective when you feel overwhelmed.

■ **Join a support group, spend time with a mentor, or see a therapist** to whom you can talk freely when you struggle with your situation.

"I don't have the time for all that!" you say. You're right—you will have to *make* time. Let other family members or community services (such as drivers and adult day care) take the ball sometimes. And if help is offered, don't turn it down! Don't allow a false sense of guilt or anxiety to drive you. Instead, set priorities, recognizing that you likely will not be able to do everything you think you should.

With wise self-care, you can make the most of your time with your loved one. A recent study from Boston College found that those who are engaged in caregiving, and see themselves making a difference, experience a deep sense of happiness and contentment. May that be true for you! ■

Beverly Burch, L.C.P.C., enjoys working with adults of all ages as they navigate life's transitions.

