Coping with age related changes in the Elderly

Enjoy a Vital, Fulfilling Life Regardless of Age

Aging is viewed as something to be fought off for as long as possible. Regardless of how liberated we’ve become, many women and men still experience aging as a threat to their sense of self worth and quality of life. It is pretty much expected that middle age will bring a “crisis” and far too often we hear seniors lament that “I thought these were supposed to be the golden years.” Whole industries are built on the attempt to stay young – from hair colors to face lifts to Viagra.

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There is a place for all of these things, of course, but if your reaction to the aging process has you racing to beat time, I’d like to ask you to take a deep breath, relax, and give yourself some space to shift into a different perspective on aging.

What if aging were equated with getting better rather than worse? What if you lived in a culture which reveres the elderly and views them as a repository of power and wisdom? What if it was understood that women really come into their greatness after menopause? Since how we age has so much to do with our attitudes and beliefs, such a shift in perspective could make a world of difference.

Aging Well in the Culture of Youth

To age “gracefully” in a culture which idolizes youth requires inner strength and wisdom. Hopefully we can ask questions together about our common notions and experiences with aging, so that we can not only do away with some myths about aging which limit our quality of life, but also discover some of the “perks” of aging that we often ignore. There are lots of role models who have led the way for us. Did you know, for example, that: Martha Graham danced professionally until she was 76? Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals at the age of 78? Georgia O’Keefe continued painting well into her 90s?

Vitality in “later life” is not just for the famous. Undoubtedly everyone knows at least one person who is living a vital, fulfilling life “despite” their age. This is really the way it should be – life should become better as we age.
Two Basic Requirements of Graceful Aging

What I’ve discovered is that there are two “basic requirements” of graceful aging. To borrow from the “Serenity Prayer”, graceful aging requires the “serenity to accept the things we cannot change; courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to know the difference.” Certainly acceptance of aging is a key to aging gracefully – but which of the changes that commonly come with age are the “things we cannot change” and which are the “things we can change?”

What You Can and Cannot Change — Importance of Relaxation

These two major requirements of successful aging – accepting the aging process and not accepting what we can change — may at first seem contradictory. Sometimes success in life involves the ability embrace the paradox that when we accept life at it is at the moment, it paradoxically opens a doorway for positive change. A common example of this is the couple who finally “get pregnant” when they’ve given up and decide to adopt a child.

The bottom line, as I see it, is the ability to relax with whatever challenges us at any given time and that includes the changes aging brings. When we are relaxed, we are open to different ways of looking at things.

Relaxation brings us out of the “fight or flight” mode that causes us to act impulsively, and gives us more ability to reflect on things. Instead of running out to buy some new anti-aging product, we can spend some time examining our fears and learning whether they are based in reality or on some cultural programming that we’d be better off ignoring.

What We Can Change — The Role of Attitude and Lifestyle

It’s been discovered that attitude has an enormous role in how we age. Much of the decline that people experience with aging comes about due to the belief that decline in function and quality of life is part and parcel of aging. In addition, many of the problems of age are not due to the process of aging itself, but rather due to the effects of a lifetime of stress and poor health habits.

It’s never too late to change the two most important ingredients to graceful aging – attitude and lifestyle.

What We Cannot Change — Coming to Terms with Our Mortality

One thing we absolutely cannot change is the fact that every day brings us closer to death. This one fact alone may account for a great deal of our difficulty with aging. As soon as we see signs of aging, we are reminded that this body is eventually going to die. As we age, we come face to face with our mortality, and to deal with this we are thrown upon our spiritual resources. Our “spiritual health” may well be measured by how we face the fact of our mortality.
With the rest of the things we cannot change, there is more of a gray area, as we are only now starting to make scientific discoveries about the aging process. Nevertheless, it’s safe to say that aging will bring change. With menopause, both male and female, we begin to live with a different hormonal environment. The appearance and function of our body changes and requires that we adapt. Our roles change dramatically as our children grow older and leave home, and we become grandparents rather than parents. At some point, many of us become parents to our parents as they enter their final years.

Growing older also brings more loss. Not only is there loss of many aspects of being young, more people we know die. This may be one of the most difficult aspects of aging. If we haven’t learned to grieve earlier in life, the all important task of learning to live with loss must be learned to avoid psychological and health problems.

**Finding a Balance**

Finally, graceful aging means finding a balance between acceptance of the inevitability of aging and doing what we can to remain vital and healthy as long as possible. Once again, we emphasize the importance of relaxing. Acceptance involves relaxation into life and the ability to flow with change. When we are relaxed, we stop fighting the inevitable. At the same time, relaxation is a key to better health and greater vitality.