The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen, dedicated to productive dialogue between research and practice. Sponsored by the Taos Institute (www.taosinstitute.net).

“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
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We have written a great deal in past Newsletters about the benefits of aging. Our hope in this is not only to challenge the pervasive and debilitating construction of age as decline, but also to kindle a deeper appreciation of this time of life. We have recently been struck by what we feel is the way aging enriches our conscious experience. There are at least two forms of this enrichment, one a sharpening and the other a layering of our daily life experiences. In the case of the sharpening of appreciative attention, we liked the words of the novelist Martin Amis, from a recent New York Times interview, “Life grows in value...Not very significant things suddenly look very poignant and charming. This particular period of my life is full of daily novelty. That turns out to be worth a great deal.” This kind of sharpening of experience is hastened by the growing awareness of the finite. When life appears endless, one scarcely savors the passing moment; when the end is closer at hand, each moment bursts with flavor.

In the case of layering, the everyday world becomes animated by our histories. A coffee cup is not simply a cup sitting there on the table. It is alive with memories – of the visitor who brought it as a gift; the design that evokes special moments in Southern France, and a mother who always admired these ceramics. Layer upon layer of memory, images, and feelings. This same layering of experience is there in the hydrangea bush, the arrival of the Sunday paper, the dining room carpet, the rake and the shovel, and so on. Simply walking about each day can set before us a feast of experience cooked up by the chef of memory.

Such enrichment also gains by virtue of contrast. When one has lived through life’s many challenges – its glories and its agonies – the meaning of the moment is not exhausted in itself. Rather, one can experience it in terms of its similarities and contrasts with other times. A man is not simply holding a grandchild on his lap; he may also be aware of a “new beginning,” “the sustaining of a tradition,” “a changing relationship to his own offspring – now a father or mother,” and “the creation of a new identity” for himself.

At these times, we may smile deeply in ways that those with fewer years under their belts could not possibly understand.

Ken and Mary Gergen
* Family Support for the Cognitively Impaired

Changes in the aging brain can often bring about mild impairments in memory and reason. Such changes can also frustrate and irritate spouses or other family members. “You are not paying attention to me!” “Why can’t you listen when I call you?” “You just don’t hear anything I say, do you?” Such comments are alienating, and family life falls flat. But, this need not be the case, and if properly approached, such impairments can actually bring families together.

In this research interviews were conducted with 56 family triads, in which one of the older members had been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment. The triad included this person, the primary care partner, and a secondary care partner – for example, an impaired father, a mother and an adult child. The major focus of the research was on how the triad dealt with this impairment, and what sorts of relationships created the most successful coping strategies. Each member of the triad was asked about how much impairment had occurred, their past experience with dementia, how much change had occurred, and why they thought it was happening. Families were evaluated as 1) in complete agreement on the diagnosis of impairment, 2) in denial of the impairment, or 3) as in mixed in their opinions.

The results of the research showed that family members who agreed about the impairment were able to proceed more successfully than those in which there was conflict of opinion or denial. In families where the one who had mild cognitive impairment was thought to be willfully difficult and uncooperative, there was more stress and least successful coping. Most heartening, in those families where all agreed about the impairment, members adjusted to each others’ observations and concerns, and they banded together to support one another while managing the changes.

The researchers stressed the importance of family members’ coordinating with each other in helping people adjust to mild cognitive impairments. Families that were “on the same page” reported actively trying to be kind to the older persons and not blame them for their shortcomings. Such families were also prepared to cooperate for future changes, thus avoiding frustrating or angry outbursts. The researchers
suggest that community based programs be developed so that families will be prepared to cope with impairments, and will allow the afflicted person to be more forthcoming about help that may be needed.


* The Joys of “Aging in Place”

“Aging in place” is a term used by policy makers in referring to older people who remain in their homes instead of moving to a residential institution in which they are part of a larger community of older people. Generally the meaning of the phrase is restricted to the actual location of the person in a house or apartment; there are no emotional or practical aspects involved. From a social policy perspective, it is simply cheaper to have people remain in their own homes, and so there is general agreement that it is a “win-win” deal if people do remain in their residences, and they like it.

But how much do they actually like it, and why? New Zealand researchers set out to explore people’s experiences with aging in place. Over a hundred participants ages 56 to 92 were brought together in small focus groups and in interviews to discuss the ideal place to grow older. As they found, there were widely shared feelings that staying in place is desirable because of the sense of attachment and connection one has established with it. There is a feeling of security that is related to being familiar to others outside one’s home. People feel that they are known and have value to others, which is highly important in maintaining one’s sense of identity. There are also warm and caring relations that are maintained by staying in one’s place. In addition, people know how to act independently when they are familiar with the surrounding setting. They know where the bank, drug store, grocery store, and medical offices are. They believe the police will come quickly if they are in trouble. This sense of rootedness reduces anxiety and allows for habits developed over decades to persist.

This did not mean that residential institutions were necessarily bad. If they could provide safe and socially vibrant communities they could be
desirable. There was a general sense that some day they might have to move, but wished to avoid being forced to go before they wished to do so.


*** IN THE NEWS ***

* The Audacity of Age

What a nice ring the headline above has. It was taken from an article in the Style section of the New York Times, focusing on the place of older women in the normally unfriendly world of fashion. The article describes the photographic work of Ari Seth Cohen, who at 30 has become fascinated with the stylish older woman. As Cohen says: “They don’t have a job; they don’t have to impress their bosses, their children, their lovers. They have no one to please but themselves.” This view is central to the book and documentary Advanced Style, created by Cohen.

Cohen is not alone in his observations. In a recent newsletter, editors of the Alliance for Aging Research featured an article, “Fashion Savvy Seniors Help Redefine Old Age.” They suggest that “Many (seniors) are living outside of the boxes that society has traditionally put them in.” And in a new blog on the Huffington Post, Robin Bobbe, says, “This is what 60 looks like.” She would like the advertising world to stop ignoring the beauty of older people. Given the shifting demographics, it won’t be long.


* Mediation for Meaning and Belonging

Increasing numbers of people are finding meditation practices helpful in moving through life with more joy and less agony. Author Lewis Richmond, a Zen Buddhist priest and meditation teacher, has addressed issues of aging in his research, workshops, and books. His recent book,
Aging as a Spiritual Practice, discusses a variety of useful meditation practices. Richmond believes that in order to live a good life, one must have a sense of belonging with others and a sense of meaning in one’s life. In his workshops he helps people to get in touch with the emotional and spiritual dimensions of aging. One of his meditation practices, for example, is called “Vertical Time.” Here one is asked to suspend the usual way of thinking about one’s life across the horizontal dimension of time, linking past events with the present. Rather, one quietly begins to focus on one’s breathing, and then moves upward to a state of inter-being, in which one begins to realize one’s connection as a living creature with all other forms of life. Another exercise focuses on gratitude. One quietly and continuously ponders the phrase, “thank you.” This act encourages images and thoughts about all the things for which we can be grateful. The half emptied cup now becomes filled.


* Free Fun

We thought it might be useful to pass on some tips from the AARP Bulletin on having some fun times that don’t cost a fortune. Here are some suggestions from people who have done just that.

1. Join a meet-up group, which means people who get together at a certain time and place to do something, but no one is keeping track of who comes and who doesn’t. These include groups for tennis, ballroom dancing, bridge, book clubs, and local park activities. Check one in your area out at meetup.com

2. Volunteer at a sporting event, festival, theater, museum or convention and get in on the fun of it free of charge.

3. Visit a local museum, zoo, or garden on select days when admission is free.

4. Check out the plays, concerts and sporting events at your local schools. They are free or low-cost, and easy to get to.

5. Keep an eye out for special “senior” discount days at all events of interest.

***BOOK REVIEW***


Ellen and I are delighted to announce the publication of our new edited book, which details the personal life stories of 22 women, academics and therapists, who are in the process of retiring from their careers or who have already done so. We include a rich range of stories about the challenges, discoveries, joys, disappointments and resolutions to such complex problems as whether to live alone or together with a partner, whether or not to embark on a new form of life, whether to move, and so on. Although the women have all been academic psychologists, their stories are relevant to anyone moving toward or through the phase of life we call retirement. The authors are also a varied lot, from their 50’s to their 80’s, diverse in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and health, but their storehouse of wisdom about this portion of the lifespan is vast.

People teaching courses in life span development, gerontology, aging, and counseling, as well as all of us planning for retirement or having done so will find riches to reflect upon. To order a “real” book or an “e” book, go to www.TaosInstitute.net

***WEB RESOURCES***

Looking for speakers? Take a look at a speaking bureau exclusively listing speakers who specialize in aging, "Next Age Speakers," a nonprofit group that charges no commissions. Visit them at: http://www.nextagespeakers.com

SAGE-ING. The Sage-ing Guild is a group specializing in conscious aging and spiritual eldering. Visit them at: http://www.sage-ingguild.org/

Website: http://www.creativeaging.org The National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA) was founded in 2001 and is dedicated to fostering an
understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging and to developing programs that build on this understanding. Based in Washington, DC, NCCA is a non-profit organization with 2,500 members and is affiliated with The George Washington University.

***ANNOUNCEMENTS***

August 17-19. "Celebrate Seventy! How Women Flourish in the Eighth Decade." To read about it, go to Esalen.org and type in Celebrate Seventy! Or go to: http://webapp.esalen.org/workshops/11364. With 10 hours of CE credits for nurses, MFT's, and LCSW's.

Sept. 26-28 Ageing and Spirituality: Linking the Generations. Canberra, Australia. Conference focuses on baby boomer and intergenerational aging addressing themes of positive aging, palliative care and the lived experience of dementia and mental illness. For more information, please visit: http://www.centreforageing.org.au

October 9-12, 2012: The 19th International Congress on Palliative Care, Palais des Congrès in Montréal, Canada. This biennial Congress has grown to become one of the premier international events in palliative care.

Deadline for Poster Submissions: May 31, 2012.


=============================================*** Information for Readers ***

We hope that you enjoy The Positive Aging Newsletter.

- Questions & Feedback
If you have any questions, or material you'd like to share
with other newsletter readers, please e-mail Mary Gergen at  gv4@psu.edu

- Past issues
Past issues of the newsletter are archived at:
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