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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IMPORTANT!

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Many thanks, Ken and Mary Gergen
There is a popular slogan making the rounds, “Old Age is Not for Sissies.” And to be sure, with increased threats to health and life, the loss of spouses and friends, and the like, it is easy to identify with this sentiment. However, one feeling that has often swept us up is sheer admiration for the way so many older people meet these harrowing challenges and continue to live lives of significance. We have now come to feel that they constitute a class of heroes, displaying ingenuity, determination, and bold resistance to the challenges of time. This election offered up one story we are compelled to share:
Ron, as we shall call him, was nearing his 75th birthday. He was a long way from home, visiting his grandchildren, a new baby and a 3-year-old boy. While eating his breakfast with his grandson one morning, he suddenly collapsed and fell to the floor. The boy cried out, “Grandpa, what are you doing?” The boy’s father heard him, and rushed to the kitchen. Ron was unconscious and apparently dying of a heart attack. With extensive CPR and the medics’ repeated attempts with a defibrillator, Ron finally began to breathe. He was put into an induced coma for days, and then he began to recover. With continuing need for care, including pain relief for his 10 broken ribs, he was not released for another week. With only a 5% survival rate for this kind of episode, the word “miracle” was whispered among the family. With his wife, Ron finally was able to fly home. Knowing about his brush with death, we were shocked when two days later, we ran into him making phone calls in a volunteer headquarters, helping as best he could to get out the vote for the elections. Ron is not alone in his heroism; he speaks for so many others, but in a very loud and inspiring voice.

Mary and Ken Gergen

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***RESEARCH***

* Enjoying Life, Thank You

It is generally assumed that with the rise in physical ailments that people acquire as they age, their sense of life satisfaction and fulfillment will decline. Yet, while there may be some truth to this hypothesis, these researchers show that there are surprising limitations to the view.

Approximately 1,000 older people in the national survey of Midlife in the United States provided information about their chronic medical conditions and also described their ongoing psychological states. Although the scale that measured life satisfaction went down slightly as health problems increased, other measures were unrelated to these increases. Instruments that measured positive affect - that is, how happy people are - were unaffected by chronic conditions. People also indicated that their sense of purpose in life was not
changed in relationship to chronic ailments. Participants continued to strive in their own ways to make a difference in the world, regardless of their medical conditions. Last, the extent to which people had positive relationships with others was not related to chronic health issues.

The research also involved checking on the level of certain blood chemicals that indicate the degree of inflammation in the body. The lower the inflammation rate, the better the prognosis is for a longer life. Those respondents with higher levels of purpose in life, positive relations with others and happier feelings, had indicators that their bodies were fighting off infections better than their colleagues who had lower well-being scores. It appears that as we go through life, we will be niggled by conditions that are not especially pleasant, but which fade in their importance to the extent that we focus on satisfying activities and relationships. Older people seem to develop the knack of being pretty happy, based on many things besides their physical conditions.


* Beating Depression

Many of us suffer from time to time with sadness, lethargy, and possibly a sense of hopelessness. Psychiatrists often view such a state as a “mental illness,” labeling it as “depression.” The diagnostic label is frequently assigned to older people. Most frequently the “depressed” person is treated chemically - with anti-depressant pills. However, to define such a state as a “mental illness” is simply the preference of the psychiatric community, and has no foundations beyond that community. One should be cautious in accepting the definition and the chemical treatment, with all its unreliability and side effects. Further, there are more promising ways of looking at the condition, and of moving beyond it.

It is in this vein that we are pleased to report on a recent article in the *American Psychologist*. University of Melbourne professor, Anthony Jorm, has gathered self-help strategies encouraged by
psychological professionals that can that counteract the “blues.” Here are some of our favorites:

1. Engage in exercise or physical activity
2. Try to sleep on a regular schedule
3. Do something you enjoy
4. Engage in some purposeful activity some of every day
5. Do what has worked before to make you feel better
6. Engage in an activity that gives a sense of achievement
7. Ask a friend to encourage you to get out and do something
8. Reward yourself for reaching a small goal
9. Learn to relax
10. Eat a healthy, balanced diet.

We would add to this list our own recommendations: Find ways to laugh out loud; get involved in a worthy cause; lose yourself in the arts; and, engage in sensual pleasures.


* Holding on to Memory Ability

As we age, in some respects our memories may become less acute. In general various research studies indicate that younger people are better than older people at accuracy in recall. Why this is so, is not clear. Often researchers look for biological causes for this general decline. Yet, when experiences are rich and deep, there is more competition when trying to recall a detail. If you know 10,000 people, it is more difficult to recall a name than if you know but a 1,000. However, there is also a matter of motivation. How much does one try to recall, especially when placed in a research setting? This latter possibility is relevant to current research on stereotypes and memory. Here the researchers wondered whether people who hold negative stereotypes about aging might be poorer at memory tasks than those who do not.

The participants in this longitudinal study were from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, and at the beginning included 113 women and 282 men. They ranged from 22-57 at the
beginning of the study. They had high levels of self-rated health, and were highly educated. (77% had graduated from college.) Twenty-two years later there remained in the study 27 women and 60 men, aged 40-74. Participants were evaluated in terms of depression, education, marital status, chronic conditions, race, self-rated health and gender. Most important for the present study, each had responded to a 16 item age-stereotype scale, composed of negative items about old people. Items included: “Old people are absent-minded” and “Old people cannot concentrate well.” They were also asked when does “old age” begin, and if they were older than this age. Or, one might say, did they feel the old age stereotype applied to themselves? Participants were finally measured every 6 years on a figure memory test, in which they had to recognize from memory a set of 10 figures.

As the results showed, participants who had more negative age stereotypes had worse memory over time than those with less negative age stereotypes. The difference between the two groups increased as they aged. Overall there was a 30% greater memory decline for those 60 and above in the more negative age-stereotype group compared to those with lesser stereotypes. The difference became greater the older the person. When the person judged themselves to be “old” the impact of negative stereotypes was greater than if the person still did not consider him/her self old. Other aspects of well-being did not undermine these findings.

The researchers suggest that people are exposed to a range of negative opinions about old people as they age, and if they are accepted, they function like a self-fulfilling prophecy. The positive side to this story is that resisting the prejudicial practices of “putting down” older people, even as a young person, preserves one’s capacities in old age.

*** IN THE NEWS ***

* The Oldest Ranked Tennis Player

Artin Elmayan is the world’s oldest ranked tennis player, at 95. He is 26th among players over 85, a list led by Italian Angelo Sala, 86. There are 39 men in the International Tennis Federation ranks for men over 85. Elmayan emigrated to Argentina from Armenia in 1938 at age 21. He never took a tennis lesson, but began to play at 39 after first paying paleta, a similar game with wooden paddle-rackets and rubber balls. Tennis provides him with a healthy and active lifestyle. He tries to play 3 times a week. Elmayan’s entire family loves to play tennis, including his wife, now 88. His philosophy: “First there is eating and then comes tennis. It is part of my life to stay in shape in every way. Tennis makes you breathe oxygen, keeps you from getting a belly.”


* Some Tips for Staying Tip Top

We share few tips on maintaining an active lifestyle and avoiding injury to yourself while having fun:

- Ease into Action: Start slowly and let your muscles warm up. Don’t jump into vigorous activity too fast.
- Strengthen the “core” .. the muscles in the middle. One way is to do “push-ups” only with the forearms on the floor, not your hands.
- Play Flamingo. It’s a balancing act, but try to stand on one leg at a time, and make it harder on yourself as you get better.
- Stretch when you aren’t doing anything else. Seems to be better than stretching before exercise. Who Knew??
- Treat Yourself: After a vigorous outing, have a bit of chocolate and some milk. Helps build muscles quicker.
- Take a Load Off. Don’t exercise every day. Go with your feelings, and if you are still tired, take another day off.
* Tom Wolfe: Did Someone Say Retirement?

At age 81, Tom Wolfe has just published a new book, Back to Blood. The novel is a portrait of Miami as a city of immigrants, where ethnicity takes pride of place. Typical of a Wolfe novel, each group comes in for sarcastic renditions. In Miami, Venezuelans, Cubans, Colombians, Haitians, Russians and Israelis jostle one another to get a foot on the ladder of the American dream, while those above them — the snobs, climbers, rich and superrich — keep their top-notch places, precariously.

Wolfe, a National Book Award winner, has had a huge audience of avid readers since the earlier publication of such favorites as Bonfire of Vanities and The Right Stuff. The present work is Wolfe’s third novel since he turned 70. And, we find there are six new projects currently intriguing him. No resting on laurels here, and for many of us Wolfe is a model of sustained, creative engagement.

***READERS RESPOND***

Hannah Kruglanski relates an inspiring story:

Dear Gergens, I thought you might want to share this fascinating story about a law professor turned artist turned dancer in her 74th year. The youtube video is in Hebrew, but this is what it is about, from my translation:

Ruth Ben-Israel was a Professor of Law at Tel Aviv University. An expert in labor law, civil procedure, social security, and occupational equality. In addition to her prolific research and publications, Ruth served as dean of the Law Faculty, and as an adviser to major governmental committees on legislative issues regarding labor, welfare, and women equality. She won the top awards in her field of which the most known are the Israel Prize in law, and the Israel Bar Association Prize for Women in Law.
Upon her retirement at the age 74 she decided to retire her professional life. She took some symbolic measures of giving away her legal library, and of erasing her legal professional work from the computer. Her next step was acquiring skills in computer graphic design, with a goal of telling biblical stories in pictures. It was a major change facing challenges of mastering a new field in which she was no longer the admired expert. As well as learning how to communicate with students who were her grandchildren's age.

Over five years she accomplished her goal of painting scenes from the bible. She was ready for a new path. That of performance dancing. She met a dance choreographer who was interested in creating a show about Old Age. She interviewed Ruth who with her husband had co-authored a book named "Who's afraid of the golden age". As a result, she invited Ruth to participate in her performance. Ruth accepted the challenge. With 50 stage performances, and with a card stating she is a professional dancer, Ruth is ready for her new path. In her words "I painted for the last 5 years and I’m ready to change again I believe a person who is fulfilled and self actualized is one that contributes to society. I am trying to be that person."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeCjDXpew6k

Enjoy!

***ANNOUNCEMENTS***

November 14-18, 2012: Gerontological Society of America 65th Annual Scientific Meeting, San Diego Convention Center, CA
Registration now open.

*** Information for Readers ***

- 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
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www.positiveaging.net

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