THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

July/August, 2014

The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen
Sponsored by the Taos Institute (www.taosinstitute.net)

“The BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
Wall Street Journal

------------------------------

Issue No 87

- COMMENTARY: Life Beyond Achievement
- RESEARCH:
  The Internet as Antidote to Depression
  Re-gaining Muscle Power
- IN THE NEWS:
  Brain Decline? Not in the Morning!
  Natural Light: A Winner
  Seniors at Play
- BOOK REVIEW: The Price of Love by Colin Murray Parkes. Guest Reviewer: Margaret Stroebe
- WEB RESOURCES
- READERS RESPOND
- ANNOUNCEMENTS
- Information for Readers
A little league baseball team from our area recently had a chance to win the national finals. In the end they lost, but when they returned home they were treated to a hero’s parade. I smiled with appreciation…but then a pause. After all, how many little league teams had competed and lost? And at what a young age all these kids began to worry about winning and losing…and mostly losing. Of course, they also have such worries in school, where performance evaluation is an everyday concern. “How well will I do; how good am I; where do I stand in comparison to others?” Then, we leave school only to face a new set of hoops: “How well will I perform at my job; how good am I; how much money will I earn; am I a good enough parent; are my children living up to their abilities?” From early years to retirement, it’s all about measuring up.

Of course, the good word for all this is “achievement,” and achievement can be fun – especially if you are a success! But there is always the pressure, the doubt, and the next day’s challenge. More importantly, when we spend our lives trying to jump over hurdles, we begin to see life this way. We begin to ask, “Where is the next goal; what should I be accomplishing today?” We slowly forget how it is to live without climbing the next mountain. When I was young the neighborhood kids would get together and play...anything and everything we could think of. We made up games, built a fort in the woods, ran a magic show, threw snowballs, played doctor...We didn’t set out to accomplish anything; we would just play for the fun of it. I think now that if there had been a little league team, were observed by a coach and parents, and winning was the point, we would not have been “playing”. We would have been achieving! We would play in order to win...not just for the creative fun of it. Our outdoor life would have become dutiful, not free.

One of the joys of living long enough is that we can again, much more fully, tune into the process of living. We can take a walk – not to get someplace, but to enjoy the scenery or a passing conversation. We can jog or ride a bike, not as a means of training, but for the enjoyment of the movement. We can paint, cook, do some woodworking, go fishing, write poetry, read a book, have a conversation, or work in the garden – not to accomplish some goal – but for the sheer pleasure of doing these things. Sure, there can be
good results of our efforts. But now it’s the process that counts; any accomplishment is just frosting on the cake. As Henry Miller once said, “The moment one gives full attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” This is fully living within the process.

Ken Gergen

-----------------------------

***RESEARCH***

* The Internet as Antidote to Depression

Being retired and alone can be a threat to well-being, especially as one ages. In many countries, there is the increasing threat of depression. In this study over 3,000 older people from the national Health and Retirement survey were assessed 4 times from 2002-2008. The respondents were evaluated for signs of depression and for the extent of their internet use. Overall they found that when these people used the internet, their mental health was good, and there was a reduction of reports of depression by over 30%. A reduction was found in the sample overall, but the effect was especially profound for older people who were living alone. When others were living in the household, the effects were lessened.

The research did not analyze the type of internet usage that was contributing to the reduction in depression, but any type of interaction appeared to reduce loneliness and isolation. Given that internet use is a form of connection, with many possible purposes, it may be useful to suggest that whenever and wherever possible, older, retired people living alone should be assured of having an internet connection that is meaningful to them.

Re-gaining Muscle Power

Many of the falls suffered by older people are related to weakening muscular strength. According to recent research, given the right muscular training, it is possible to recover from a threat to balance, and remain upright instead of falling. To counteract the tendency to fall, training programs are being designed to help people build muscles. This study investigated the effects of 12 weeks of explosive-type heavy-resistance training for 60–65 and 80–89 year old women dwelling in their own homes. This type of exercise involves heavy weights that are lifted as rapidly as possible. The researchers found that this training seems to be safe and well tolerated in healthy women even in the eighth decade of life. Importantly, this exercise also affected the neuromuscular changes that are commonly associated with the risk of falls and disability among those in advanced age. This exercise program led to significant enhancement in neuromuscular performance even among the oldest women. The present results suggest that following explosive-type resistance training, elderly individuals are more capable of rapidly responding to threats to their physical balance, for example when stepping off a curb unexpectedly. These women have an increased ability to prevent a fall compared with untrained age-matched individuals.

Importantly, international guidelines for physical activity for older adults suggest a training frequency of three to five times a week. However, it is often a problem to motivate individuals to take part in such vigorous training programs. The present data demonstrated that healthy elderly women can effectively benefit from participating in low-frequency training programs at least when explosive muscle actions are involved.

Other research indicates that the same finding proves true with men of all ages. As researchers suggest, “True strength development requires you to lift heavy loads—light load training ...just won’t do it.” Heavy training has carryover for power as long as one focuses on intentional explosive force. The results suggest that one will get stronger, faster, and improve endurance and body composition by lifting heavy loads.


*** IN THE NEWS ***

*Brain Decline? Not in the Morning!*

Early birds not only catch more worms, but it seems that humans who are up early also are advantaged in terms of cognitive activity. But what about age? Does increasing age reduce this ability? To study the affects of time of day on cognitive performance, researchers gave a series of memory tests to younger and older adults in morning and afternoon sessions. Eighteen adults aged 60 to 87 took the tests between 8:30 and 10:30 in the morning. In the afternoon, between 1:00 and 5:00, another 16 adults in the same age range took the tests. The same tests were given at the same times to 16 younger adults (ages 19 to 30). The tests included performance on a series of tasks where pictures and words were flashed on a computer screen while irrelevant words and pictures interfered with their concentration. At the same time, researchers scanned participants’ brains with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Interestingly, in the morning there were only small differences between the young and the old. According to psychologist Ulrich Mayr, “The brain of an older adult tested in the morning looks more like a young adult.” The study did find significant differences between older and younger people’s brain scans when the tests were in the afternoon. The findings show “the typical effect of aging is reduced when older adults are tested at the ideal time of day,”

As psychologists John Anderson commented, “It’s good news...Older adults are more focused and better able to ignore distraction in the morning than in the afternoon...Cognitive decline is not as drastic as people thought it was.” Researchers suggest that older adults might do well to schedule intellectually challenging tasks in the morning, when they are likely to be most alert. As Dr. Lynn Hasher observes, "Since older adults tend to be morning-type people, ignoring time of day when testing them on some tasks may create an inaccurate picture of age differences in brain function."

* Natural Light: A Winner

For those who spend a good part of the day inside, it makes a difference as to which room you spend most of your time. As research suggests, try to avoid spending most of your time in rooms without natural sunlight beaming through the window. According to this research, office workers who are exposed to natural light during the day are happier, report better health, sleep better and are more likely to be active throughout the day than their counterparts who work in windowless offices. The research was done with 49 day-shift workers, including 27 in windowless workplaces and 22 in offices with windows. Workers with windows tended to be higher up on the pay and power scale, so these factors were also considered. Previous research showed the importance of natural light for alertness, improving sleep and maintaining cognitive performance. If you are stuck in an interior space, either at work or at home, it might be a good idea to go out of your way each day to get a bit of sunshine.


* Seniors at Play

In a whimsically playful mood, the Contilia Retirement Group in Essen, Germany created a calendar in which they recreated famous movie scenes. According to German press, 50,000 calendars were printed, and they were given out to residents of the senior center, along with relatives and staff. The calendar models were interviewed about the project and said it was a ton of fun to dress up as their favorite actors. The shoot was done with professional stylists and photographers to make sure everything looked as cool as possible. The oldest senior involved with the calendar was 98 years old!

Guest Reviewer: Dr. Margaret Stroebe

If any book can give us the sense of a personal worth, of a life still magnificently being spent as an octogenarian, it is this one. “The Price of Love” compiles a self-chosen selection of the works of Colin Murray Parkes, an internationally-renowned British psychiatrist, who continues to dedicate his career to the understanding and care of bereaved people, both as a researcher and practitioner. His contributions, represented in this volume, range from scientific understanding of the underlying phenomena and manifestations of grief and grieving to the development of national bereavement care services, and from individually supporting the dying and bereaved, to heartbreaking, grueling experiences as consultant and advisor in disasters across the world. The selection reflects the evolution of Parkes’s own remarkable work and historical developments across the various domains of his involvement.

This is not just a book for easy academic reference to an author’s diverse contributions; it is one that draws us into the journey of an exceptional lifetime. On a personal note: as a bereavement researcher, I have followed Colin Murray Parkes’s career closely and read most of his work over the years. And yet, put together for the World Library of Mental Health series, this selection took me by total surprise and moved me to the core. His lifetime’s contribution unfolds; his added reflections speak deeply to one from these pages.

His closing words reflect his approach to life and work and are fitting ones here:

“Love and loss, it seems, can contribute to some of the darkest, saddest and most painful aspects of life. Indeed, the cost of commitment can be very high. Any simplistic and sentimental idea that we may have had that love solves all problems must be set aside. And yet our commitment to care, which is another aspect of love, may also hold the key to solving those problems and to discovering that the price of love can be a price worth paying.” (Parkes, 2014, pp. 230-231)
*** READERS RESPOND***

* Ellen Cole writes:

Hi Mary! Thought readers of the Positive Aging Newsletter might be interested in an account of my now two+ year-old hip replacement. It was recently published in the Huffington Post, and to my surprise elicited 30 comments. I think it must have encouraged others to consider their own infirmities or medical issues in a more accepting and positive way.


[http://qfeguy.com/](http://qfeguy.com/) An interesting blog by a 67 year old man, who has taken up hula hooping and loves it. He wrote to recommend “hooping” to the readers of the Positive Aging Newsletter.

***ANNOUNCEMENTS***

MEMOIRS: "Writing Meaningful Memoirs” (Oct. 10-11, 2014, Park City, UT). An interactive seminar presented by Nan Phifer and the Life Story Library Foundation, at Silver Baron Lodge, 2900 Deer Valley Dr. East, Park City, Utah. Nan Phifer, author of MEMOIRS OF THE SOUL, leads participants to identify significant events in their lives and tell their story in written form. For registration details visit: [http://www.lifestorylibrary.org](http://www.lifestorylibrary.org) or email info@lifestorylibrary.org or (888) 827-8893

Oct 27-Nov. 2, 2014: A SEASONAL CELEBRATION OF CRONES IN AUTUMN through SACRED CIRCLE DANCE at GHOST RANCH in New Mexico --we will dance where Georgia O’Keefe painted. Sacred Circle Dances are moving meditations that embody and integrate mind, body and spirit. These simple, gentle dances have ancient roots in music and dance from around the world. No previous dance experience is needed. Our philosophy of dance, “There are no mistakes, only variations.” Workshop fee $435 + 6 nights lodging and food. Register at [www.ghostranch.org](http://www.ghostranch.org) Or call 505-685-4333 ext. 4155,
Feb. 27-28, 2015. The University of Toronto is sponsoring a Symposium, "Playing Age," This symposium asks how aging can be investigated through the playfulness of artistic representations. The Symposium will explore works produced by musicians, video game designers, theatre and performance artists, film makers and authors—works that enable us to recognize aging as not only a biological process but also as malleable, culturally mediated experiences. Symposium co-organizers, Profs. Marlene Goldman (mgoldman@chass.utoronto.ca) and Lawrence Switzky (lawrence.switzky@utoronto.ca)