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"THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING"
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COMMENTARY

***What's More Important than Physical Well-Being?**

In a recent issue of *Aging Today*, I was struck by an article by Chuck Gillespie about the meaning of “well-being”. Gillespie contended that when the topic of well-being is mentioned, we most often think of our physical health. How healthy are we? We might then think about exercise and diet. As older adults, many of us are sensitive to our less than perfect health habits. Am I exercising enough, eating the right foods, or paying enough attention to what my doctor advises? And do I really want to give up my little sins of chocolate, alcohol, ice cream or the like?

But Gillespie cautions us not to get too carried away with the idea that well-being is equal to physical status. In fact, it might be secondary. A much broader view of “well-being” is in order, one that emphasizes making choices that lead “toward a life worth living.” And what makes a life worth living may have little to do with our physical status. To illustrate, Gillespie used the example of Steven Hawking, the famous physicist who lived to be 76, but whose physical health was appalling. Hawking said, “However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at.” Despite his deformities, he was able to cultivate an “intellectual, social, occupational, spiritual and emotional purpose – a life worth living”. It has been particularly nurturing to me to think of aspects of life such as these as more significant to my well-being than the particular condition of my body.

After all, one may be in perfect health, and suffer enormously from interpersonal conflict, love withdrawn, loneliness, the sense of failure, and more. And one may be in the painful throes of childbirth and feel ecstatic over the wonders of what is occurring. To be sure, there are vast differences among people in what provides the sense of a worthwhile life. But clearly the medical model of well-being is limited.

In terms of positive aging, I conclude from this reading that regardless of what happens to our bodies, there is enormous potential for life nourishment available to us. We should pay special attention to the

sources of joy in our daily lives, as the continued nurturing of these sources may have life-long consequences.

▪ Mary Gergen

From: “Wellness and well-being – it’s all about connection by Chuck Gillespie. *Aging Today*, March-April, 2019.

RESEARCH

***Use with Caution: “I’m too old for...”**

Physically one may indeed be too old to have a baby or to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. But the phrase, “I am too old for...” must be used with caution. All too often it is used as an excuse for conforming to popular stereotypes of how older people should behave. Thus, common stereotypes about age appropriate behavior ultimately become reflected in an older woman’s comments, “I’m too old for going out dancing, “or the widower who exclaims, “I’m too old to be flirting like an adolescent.” As Italian researchers Diego Romaioli and Alberta Contarello see it, the phrase “I’m too old for...” is a *toxic narrative*. If one chooses this story about oneself, it may stifle one’s impulses, suppress the imagination, and prevent one from an actively engaging in life. Rather than challenging and changing the common stereotypes, one becomes their victim.

To explore these issues further, the researchers interviewed 78 adults of all ages. Most were in good health, had completed secondary school, and were economically stable. Each was asked about using the phrase “I’m too old for...” As the researchers found, there were indeed cases in which the phrase functioned in a self-destructive way. An older male participant said he was too old to start on a career. Yet there are now increasing numbers of retirees who are starting off on new careers, and these careers are usually more fulfilling than those in which they have participated for most of their adult lives. There were also many who didn’t use the “too old for” narrative. This seemed especially the case among respondents who spoke positively about their lives. For example, one elderly man spoke enthusiastically about his freedom to do as he wished, “I often go to the mountains, I attend centers, I teach in schools on request, and so I have a great life! He simply didn’t seem

concerned about age norms.

The researchers were especially interested in what they called *counter-narratives*, that is, stories used to resist or thwart the tendency to bow to social norms. Three of these counter-narratives should be widely shared. We label them as follows:

Determination: Some respondents were simply determined to keep their youthful ways. They used the phrase “will power”, to refer to their efforts to remain strong, lively, and engaged no matter the costs.

Resistance: Some respondents were quite aware of the stereotypes, and felt it their duty to fight against them. One should break the norms of “acting your age” simply because they are injurious.

Integrity: Other respondents felt they simply had to act as they did; they were compelled by the impulse or desire to be as they are. There was among them a sense that their identity was aligned with that activity. “If I don’t continue to run, I am not the person I think I am.”

The researchers cautioned that their sample did not include poor, uneducated, or severely disabled participants. For them, the narrative of being too old may be a way of depicting their living conditions. If one is ill or having trouble putting food on the table, fighting stereotypes is not a high priority.

From: “I’m too old for ...” looking into a self-sabotaging rhetoric and its counter narratives in an Italian setting” by Diego Romaioli and Alberta Contarello, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 2019, 48, 25-32.

*** IN THE NEWS ***

***Wisdom: A Customized Resource in Aging**

One of the joys of aging is to share the resources acquired from a lifetime of world experience. We often call these resources *wisdom*. Yet, the paradox of wisdom is that although many people grow old, they do not all share the same kind of wisdom. And this is because wisdom can take many forms. Not all wise older people vote for the same candidates, save carefully for retirement, or rise as exemplars of virtue within their families. Some old people are grumpy, self-centered, or silly. But as Mark Agronin writes, despite difficulties and differences, some form

of wisdom may be found in each of us as we age. Perhaps it is the knowledge of how to make another person feel valued, or it is the ability to help another get her prescriptions filled, or perhaps it is filling out a tax form for someone who cannot. Paul Baltes, a well-known German gerontologist, believed that wisdom was a form of *applied expert knowledge* that springs from years of living, despite inevitable losses.

Wisdom can take the form of making good pragmatic decisions, developing empathy and the ability to care for others, or it may be a wellspring of creativity that could be applied to artistic crafts, relationships or other activities. Perhaps wisdom takes a turn to the spiritual, or to naturalistic concerns that center on animals, plants or the Earth itself. For older people wisdom is protective. Being wise about one's place on earth, one's limitations and advantages, and knowing that we are here as a gift of other generations, and humble about our importance in the universe, leads us to feelings of well-being and contentment. "Wisdom is always growing, changing and offering us new opportunities. It is up to each one of us to choose – to realize that aging can be less of a problem and more of a solution to life's inevitable challenges."

From: Like Intelligence, Wisdom Comes in Many Forms by Marc E. Agronin. *Aging Today*, January-February, 2019, pg. 3

*** The Joy of Being a Woman in her 70's**

Noted author, Mary Pipher, writes about the gifts of living that being a woman in her 70's can experience. As she advises, although we must participate in an ageist society, there are ways to thrive on the margins. We can live without the male gaze, and feel free for the first time in a long time from worrying about our looks. We have developed resilience, and have learned that happiness is a skill and a choice. "We know how to create a good day."

She also suggests that every day can offer the bounty of beauty, humor and love. Everything can be made workable, and happiness is built by attitude and intention. Although there are losses, there are also

gains in terms of finding things to love and appreciate. We develop reasonable expectations and know that we cannot have everything, but we learn to want what we can have.

By the same token, she says, we can say no to things we don't want to do. We are less anxious and more content, less driven and more able to live in the moment. We have a "shelterbelt" of good friends and perhaps a long-term partner. They can be our emotional health insurance policy.

"By the time we are 70, we have all had more tragedy and more bliss in our lives than we could have foreseen. If we are wise, we realize that we are but one drop in the great river we call life and that it has been a miracle and a privilege to be alive."

From: *The Joy of Being a Woman in her 70's* by Mary Pipher, *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2019, SR 10.

Her newest book is *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing as We Age*.

* **Toward a More Playful Culture of Dementia**

Mary Fridley shares:

Dear friends,

I am thrilled to share with you "[Changing 'the tragedy narrative': Why a growing camp is promoting a more joyful approach to Alzheimer's](#)," an article in last week's *Washington Post* that I have the honor of appearing in. It focuses a much-needed spotlight on a growing international movement of people working to create a more relational, empowering, humanistic and playful culture of dementia.

While the article was initially inspired by articles Susan Massad and I wrote for the Changing Aging blog, it is truly inspired by everyone – including all of you – doing such wonderfully caring and creative work in this arena.

I hope you will help get word out about the article by:

- Posting it on your website
- Sharing it through Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media

- Sharing it within your professional networks

Here is a shortened version of the link that you can use for posting and sharing: <https://wapo.st/2UosOJn>

Anything you can do is greatly appreciated.

Thanks for all your support! - Mary Fridley

BOOKS and WEBSITES

***The Longevity Plan: Seven Life-Transforming Lessons from Ancient China** by Dr. John D. Day and Jane Ann Day, with Matthew LaPlante. 2017. Harper

Dr. and Mrs. Day tell the story of visiting a Chinese village where being a centenarian is not an extraordinary feat. Dr. Day, a cardiologist, was fascinated with the prospects of a group of people who live active, productive lives into their 100th year. The question most pressing for this couple was how to explain the reasons that these people could thrive so energetically while living in a poor rural backwater of China.

This book tells the story of their visits and what they have concluded about living well with impressive longevity. It is a story about daily routines, sunshine, sleep, activity, relationships, and food. The Days became friendly with a variety of the locals who shared their wisdom about their sustained and spritely life. Most of the locals grew their own vegetables, many fished in the river, and what they enjoyed was eating fully and freely from the fresh food. Although today the villagers are becoming famous for their healthy lifestyle, and visitors are coming from near and far to find out their secrets, the centenarians have also struggled through times of civil wars, the Cultural Revolution and government interference. They have not always had enough to eat, or safety from marauding troops. Yet, getting back to their basics has allowed for healing, and their bodies have overcome the privations of early times. Without medical care, medicines or other interventions, they have arrived at old age without the seemingly inevitable problems of the Western world.

The book is a fascinating read, with many recommendations for leading a healthier, happier and longer life. Colorful photographs give

an added sense of being there with the Days during their travels to this seemingly magical realm. M.M.G.

* **Positive Conscious Aging**

Grace Smith shares:

Dear Mary

Having just read and enjoyed your latest Positive Aging newsletter, I feel it would like to bring your attention to the work I have been doing in Cape Town, South Africa.

I have just launched a new website www.amindofgrace.co.za with the intention of bringing out a monthly newsletter with tips and news about positive conscious aging. I would be grateful if you could see your way to letting your readers know about my forthcoming blog posts which I plan to circulate on a weekly basis.

Many thanks and best wishes,
Grace Smith

*****READERS RESPOND*****

* Christopher Tovey writes:

Dear Mary,

I have found your newsletters extremely encouraging and informative. I am an Existential Therapist in private practice in Kenilworth, Warwickshire, UK. In January 2019, at the age of 70, I began a full-time research PhD project at Warwick University, Centre for Lifelong Learning. My proposal is to explore the value of counseling and psychotherapy services for people in later life. It will be a qualitative 'narrative inquiry' entirely from the perspective of 'Age UK' counseling service users aged over 65. It will be published next month.

My philosophical, and phenomenological, approach to counseling is somewhat out of favour in the UK National health service system. I believe counseling can be helpful in many different ways for a diverse range of people who do not consider themselves to be 'ill'. Older people in the UK are often treated as passive and vulnerable patients in gradual

decline by the NHS, rather than continuously and positively developing elders in control of their own meaningful and purposeful lives.

I would be very happy to send you any material you think might be a useful contribution to the ongoing global conversations around the broader issues of aging.

Thank you and Best Wishes,

Christopher Tovey MEd.,

BA (Hons) Person-Centred Counseling & Psychotherapy

*****ANNOUNCEMENTS*****

***A New Open Access Journal**

* *Innovation In Aging*. Oxford University Press.
<https://academic.oup.com/innovateage>

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***** 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, including our translated issues in Spanish, German, French, Portuguese, Danish, and Chinese are archived at:
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