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THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER
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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Mary and Kenneth Gergen
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“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
Wall Street Journal

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*****Commentary: Engines of Adventure**

The young often look upon the old as “unfortunate,” and loathe the idea they should ever have such misfortune. Industries thrive on assisting people to avoid being seen as old. And yet, the years after schooling and before retirement are often occupied with work that requires long hours, is stressful, and not very rewarding. And while raising children has its rewards, the demands are also strenuous. When the children reach teen years, the entire family may go on an emotional roller coaster. In effect, for several decades one is under a great deal of pressure, engaged in activities that may be necessary, but not always very rewarding. But with retirement from jobs and child-rearing, the barn door swings wide.

It is often said that every exit is also an entrance. Thus, to finish something is not only an ending, but the opportunity for a new beginning. At the same time, when one enters the latter years, what is there to begin? For many people it seems too late in life to launch anything of significance. One may feel “too old a dog” to learn new tricks. And who cares whether one does anything new or not? As we shall discuss below, in a news item on purpose in life, everyone should care. One’s health and well-being may depend upon it. But then, where does one start? There are no invitations out there. Where is the motivation to learn new tricks?

We have been increasingly struck by the number of friends and acquaintances who, in their post-retirement years, have taken up a new adventure. Some decide to write a book, others to paint or sculpt, play an instrument, take singing lessons, plant a garden, raise chickens, build a cabin, run for office, take up photography, design clothing, become a blogger, or even start a new business or non-profit organization. As we talk with acquaintances, we have been struck with their enthusiasm about their activities; they are excited and eager to talk about what they are doing, and how they got started.

As we also learned, there are many sources of these adventures. Three seemed particularly significant to us: For one, people draw upon longstanding fantasies. They always wanted to paint, design clothing,

or play the piano -but never had the time. Their fantasies now become realized. Second, they been to recall activities they loved before they “went professional.” They remember how much as children or teenagers they liked to draw or sing, or work with their hands; they remember how they loved to write poetry or bicycle through the countryside. Now they return to nourish these enthusiasms. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, some people simply followed a spontaneous impulse. Our friend, Charles, who lived near the desert, decided on a whim to paint the stones in his yard in bright colors. A year later stone painting was a major hobby. So, the engines for new adventures are there, if we but pay attention. Nobody is stopping us, but ourselves.

Ken and Mary Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

*** Speed Training and Reducing the Risk of Dementia**

As the aging population has grown ever larger in proportion, talk of dementia circulates ever more broadly. How to avoid mental decline is one of the most urgent questions. Searching for ways to counteract dementia has also been a high profile effort among health-oriented researchers. According to Jerri Edwards, Professor of Medicine, Univ. of South Florida, her research is one of the first to show significant long-term effects of an intervention not involving drugs.

In her research, some 3,000 healthy and well-functioning people, average age 74, contributed to the study. The participants, most of whom were white women, were split into three groups, each with a different activity designed to improve their cognitive functioning: 1) memory, 2) reasoning or 3) speed of processing. During the speed training, users were asked to identify visual targets - for example, cars or trucks- briefly flashed on the screen. To fulfill the assignment, participants had to engage in ten, 60-75 minute sessions in 6 weeks. A control group did not do any training. Of the original participants, roughly a third completed the 10-year follow-up. During that ten years 260 study participants developed dementia.

Most dramatically, the findings showed that the group that had done the training for processing speed had a 29% reduced risk for developing dementia after 10 years, compared to those who did not do the drill. Those who completed the most training sessions had the greatest benefit. The other training - focusing on improving memory or reasoning - did not have the same results.

Dr. Edwards said, "Mental quickness starts to decline as early as 25 years of age and is a hallmark of aging... I think that speed of processing training is particularly important because it's targeting the very basic ability that can affect all aspects of your life." Some doubt that such a small amount of training could have such dramatic effects. Further research should be especially useful.

From: Speed of processing training results in lower risk of dementia. By Jerri Edwards, et al. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trci.2017.09.002>

* **Laughing Our Way to Health**

Exercising can be a significant contributor to having a healthy and positive old age, but many older people do not exercise. One of the major reasons is that exercise programs are often not much fun. These researchers wondered if an exercise program that featured laughter, would make a difference. Would the addition of laughter influence people to exercise more?

The study was conducted over a 12 week period, with meetings twice a week for 45 minutes each. There were 27 participants in these *LaughActive* classes, mostly women between 81-90. The classes were held in assisted living centers, and measures were taken before and after the program.

The course was a combination of simulated laughter exercises with a physical exercise – using light weights, along with balance and a flexibility exercises. In the simulated laughter exercises, people “faked” laughter as they looked at each other. At the same time, the faking of laughter often led to genuine laughter and other antics. The laughter exercises also incorporated physical activities such as flexing and extending the arms, while laughing.

Results of the study were striking. The participants showed significant improvements in mental health, aerobic endurance, and self-efficacy. They also reported a greater sense of peace, happiness, calmness, and behavioral/emotional control. They greatly enjoyed the classes. None of the participants dropped out of the program. Of course, the hope is now that the participants will be encouraged to continue other exercise classes that might not be as fun. However, for most of us the implication is that we might try to find ways of lightening up about exercising. Rather than looking at it as a necessary burden, can we use music, television or other means of creating an atmosphere of entertainment. As MG advises, “Don’t exercise, go out and play.”

From: Evaluation of a laughter-based exercise program on health and self-efficacy for exercise by C. M. Greene, J. C. Morgan, L.S. Traywick, & C. A. Mingo. *The Gerontologist*, 2017, 57, 1051-1061.

***** IN THE NEWS *****

*** Purpose as Life-Saving**

According to a number of research studies, having a purpose in life is not only personally rewarding, it is also associated with good health. Having purpose is linked to a number of positive health outcomes, including better sleep, and fewer strokes and heart attacks. In addition, there is a lower risk of dementia and disability. In part, these positive outcomes are linked to the way that people with a sense of purpose take care of themselves. They are more likely to check in with preventive health services, and to get mammograms, colonoscopies and flu shots.

It should come as no surprise, then, that having purpose may save your life. A longitudinal study of more than 6,000 individuals - young and old – indicated that those with greater purpose were 15 percent less likely to die in a given year than those who were aimless. Having purpose was protective across the life span – for people in their 20s as well as those in their 70s.

Having purpose is not a fixed trait, and one can develop (or lose) purpose at any time in life. Purposes can be great or small - from planting a little garden to putting together a new business. In our opening essay we talked about several ways in which people find new aims in life after retirement. Purpose can also emerge from our daily encounters with others, as we talk about what matters in our families, communities, or the world more generally. We were particularly struck by a program run by Experience Corps, an organization that trains older adults to tutor children in urban public schools. Both the children and the tutors drew nourishment from their relationship. Interestingly, however, the tutors showed marked improvements in mental and physical health. The improvements included higher self-esteem, more social connectedness, and better mobility and stamina. Perhaps this should not be surprising. For most people helping others is especially meaningful. And it reduces the dangers of a me-centered life.

From: Finding purpose for a good life, also a healthy one by Dhruv Khullar, *NYTimes*, Jan. 1, 2018, online.

***Mental Focus: Tricks to Evade Distraction**

The ability to stay in focus is sometimes difficult. Not only are there the distractions of every day life, but as well the storehouse of memories that pop into mind without invitation. To focus requires a certain discipline, and it is something that may be helped by engaging in certain activities and not others. According to various research studies, here are a few ways to promote focus:.

1. Read a good novel. In a study done at Emory University, people who read at night increased connectivity in the part of the brain associated with language. This change lasted for five days after the participants in the study finished the book.
2. Play an instrument, meditate, or write without interruptions for 30 minutes. Being able to focus on one single, complex task improves one's ability to focus on other tasks.

3. Work in the morning. The brain is fresher in the morning. It is a shame to waste these hours on trivial matters. In one study, participants aged 60-82 performed better on cognitive tasks when tested in the morning, rather than the afternoon.
4. Chew gum. We have our misgivings, but in a study at Cardiff University in Wales, people chewing gum were able to respond more quickly and accurately to a test of recalling random numbers than those who did not.

From: Keep Your Mental Focus by Ken Budd, *AARP Bulletin*. December, 2017, pgs. 1, 22.

*** BOOK REVIEWS

* *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations About Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, & Regret*, Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, New York: Oxford University Press.

I am drawing here from *New York Times* reviewer Dwight Garner's review of Nov. 6, 2017. Garner finds the book first dull, and then more biting and fun. "Ordinarily the authors do not write together, and often they do not agree, but their mood is open and friendly, and the style is sometimes lively and unorthodox. They disagree about many things: Whether retirement should be required (he says yes, she fights back); older adult communities (she finds them dull and he delightful.) She recalls the era-defining book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and wonders where that spirit of investigation into health and sexuality went. 'I fear that my generation is letting disgust and shame sweep over us again, as a new set of bodily challenges beckons.' "

"In terms of cosmetic procedures, she says why not? And he doesn't disagree. The hard part will be to steer a "course between the Scylla of excessive deference to 'nature' and the Charybdis of obsession with flight from age."

Garner also points out other books, some he might even enjoy more than the present one. "We are in a boomlet of frisky writing about growing old, from Michael Kinsley's *Old Age: A Beginner's Guide* to the

several memoirs from the English editor Diana Athill to Arlene Heyman's story collection *Scary Old Sex*.

Let's also toast Jane Juska, who died on Oct. 24, for her 2003 memoir, *A Round-Heeled Woman*. It had plenty to say about late-life sexual desire, and said it well." MMG

* *When I Need Your Help, I'll Let You Know: And Other Senior Myths That Can Lead to Disaster*. By Barbara A. West, J.D. and Stephen F. Adler. Prominence Publishing, 98 pp. \$12.95

Reviewed by Deborah Pratt Curtiss

Wake up! And do what is necessary. Now! This timely, succinct book provides essential perspectives for those of us who are aging *and* for our current or eventual caregivers. Senior Myth #1 is the book's title. Like each of the five Myths presented, it is followed by sections titled, "The Reality" and "Tools for the Caregiver." For Myth #1, the reality is, "You Won't Know When You Need Help," as it often comes unannounced and unexpected. The Caregiver tools address "Powers of Attorney" so that there is someone who can make decisions when an elder cannot. Interwoven within each chapter are relevant personal stories well told. A Glossary of Terms is at the back of the book and, given the clear organization, no index is needed.

Myth #2: "I Will Live In My Own Home Until I Die," is followed by "The Reality: You May Be Unsafe At Home." Tools, that in most cases are organized as a useful checklist, comprise "Thinking Through Home-Based Care." Myth #3: "When I am Old, Ill And Dying, My Family Will Take Care Of Me," but the reality is, "Family Members Are Not Always Capable." Their own priorities and responsibilities may simply prevent them from providing the care that an aging parent requires. Thus, Tools for "Creating an end-of-life Care Plan" identifies the aspects of care that one might need to provide, how to find, interview, and secure appropriate in-home care for one's loved one.

Myth #4 becomes highly practical: "When I can No Longer Manage My Money and Financial Affairs, A Trusted Person Will Handle My Finances." The authors point out that many seniors are unwilling to divulge their financial matters to others, and cobble together a variety of

procedures that, as we age and tend to forget details, might result in unforeseen losses—to say nothing of being vulnerable to schemers and scammers both within and outside the family.

“I Don’t Want To Do Any Estate Planning And I Don’t Need A Will. When I Die, My Family Will Sort It Out” is Myth #5. The Reality is, “Creating A Will Or A Trust Is A Gift To Your Family.” Another aspect is that dying without a will can result in much of one’s assets going to lawyers and courts to settle one’s estate; Charles Dickens wrote a lengthy novel, *Bleak House*, that colorfully illustrates that sorry situation.

Through their own professional and personal lives, the authors’ conclude that, as we age, we are less likely to accept reality and more likely to cling to myths. Belief in, or being stuck in any one of the “Myths,” will defer action and be potentially harmful to both the senior and her or his family and heirs.

“*When I Need Your Help, I’ll Let You Know*,” is a clarion call. While reading it, I longed for examples of elders, however, who made wise decisions about the last chapters of their lives. It is what I hope I have done so far and will continue to do as my needs change, especially *before* any crisis.

Attention to aging as positively, gracefully, *and sensibly* as possible, is a challenge with which all must reckon. “*When I Need Your Help...*” provides the basics of *sense* with *sensibility*.

*****READERS RESPOND**

*** The Anti-Ageist Movement**

We have been in communication with well-known author on aging, Margaret Morganroth Gullette. Margaret has also been instrumental in helping to organize an anti-ageist movement. Like the *Declaration of Independence* and other declarations of human rights, she has penned a *Declaration of Grievances*. This Declaration sets out essential rights of the aging. Space does not allow our including the document, but it is available at the URL at the end of her commentary. Here we include

Margaret's note to us about the movement. As she writes:

I knew from the beginning of this latest book that the critical question for anti-ageism today is why there is no movement, comparable to the women's movement, the civil-rights movement, the movement for gay rights, when the need is so urgent.

It was clear that major early revolutions of thought managed to present to the public powerful documents: *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (Seneca Falls, women's movement, 1848). Any movement against ageism would need such a platform.

Even after decades of writing as an age critic for the mainstream press, for cross-over readers, for feminist and progressive journals, for literary magazines, it did not occur to me that I could be the person to compose the necessary document. So I started *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*, with what I meant to resonate as a call to others, to compile the materials for such a document. From the historical models, I knew what it would have to do: reveal worlds of inflicted suffering in the form of succinct grievances.

By the time I had finished the book, however, to my surprise, I had done that. I had compiled so many different aspects of ageism, and so many stories of suffering, that it was possible to write --rather rapidly, indeed--the two pages at the end of the book called "A Declaration of Grievances." Here it is, with a title that declares the mission: to unite around a growing set of understandings of the wrongs.

<http://www.nextavenue.org/how-an-anti-ageist-movement-unites/>

ANNOUNCEMENTS

***A New Open Access Journal**

Innovation In Aging. Oxford University Press. The Gerontological Society of American's first fully Open Access, online journal, published innovative approaches to evaluating and addressing the challenges and opportunities of human aging.

<http://Academic.oup.com/innovateage>

March 1-4, 2018: Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) annual meeting. Atlanta, Georgia. Opening Plenary Session: Transforming the Business of Aging through Training, Education, and Skills Development. Register at aghe.org/register

*July 23-27, 2018: World Congress of Gerontology and Geriatrics. San Francisco, CA. The theme is “Global Aging and Health: Bridging Science, Policy, and Practice.” This is the premier meeting for professionals in gerontology and geriatrics. A special treat: THE AGE STAGE. The program highlights the many ways creativity plays a role in aging. Three days of entertainment, music, dance, fashion, and the visual arts, plus a one-day tech track. Information at iagg2017.org/agestage

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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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