



=====

THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

April/May/June 2019

Issue 109

=====

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

"THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING"
Wall Street Journal

Inside this Issue

- COMMENTARY: Going Beyond the Comfort Zone

- RESEARCH:

Is Laughter Really the Best Medicine?

Counting Steps: Enough Already?

Combatting Social Isolation and Loneliness

-IN THE NEWS:

Mother Nature's Gift of Health

Jane Goodall at 85: Nature's Best Friend

Back to Work for a Grande Dame of Documentaries

- READERS RESPOND

- ANNOUNCEMENTS

- INFORMATION FOR READERS

*****COMMENTARY*****

*** Going Beyond the Comfort Zone**

The heat and humidity of this summer has its way of sapping the energies. In a moment of inactivity, we thus found ourselves wondering if growing older also invites us to remain too much in our zones of comfort. When we are young we know so little about the world, we are curious, we experiment, and sometimes we live on the edge. We find some activities pleasurable, fascinating, fulfilling, and dangerously exciting. Other adventures prove boring, painful, or all too risky. Over time, then, it is only natural to return repeatedly to the former, and avoid the latter. Why risk trying something new, we may ask, when we know we will enjoy or be engaged by what we have done before? Why seek out new friends when we enjoy our old ones; why take a chance on a new holiday spot when we can count on those we know?

But the costs of “no sweat” living are many. There is little challenge to our thinking, imagination, and potential. We cease to learn very much that is new, while simultaneously losing memory of the past. Excitement and enthusiasm wane, as we have “been there, done that” all too often. The reproduction of brain cells slows, the couch increasingly beckons, and the line between life and death is slowly blurred.

We have consistently proposed in this Newsletter that the latter years of life can be the richest period of development in the lifespan. But this also means resisting the allure of the comfort zone. How then can we accomplish this? In our recent musings we found ourselves drawn in two directions. The first is to make specific plans to disrupt the usual. Our model here was an activity introduced to us by a couple who lived nearby. They called it “mystery night.” Once each month or so, one couple was charged with the responsibility of developing a mysterious evening out, one that would surprise the other, and about which they would be told nothing in advance (except dress requirements). Depending on the couple in charge, we might variously find ourselves singing in a 1950s throwback karaoke bar, skating at a roller

rink, or spending an evening on a giant pillow. The evenings were filled with both surprise and laughter. Carrying this image into the present, we have made periodic pacts with each other to disrupt the ordinary. As you can imagine, this has resulted in both delight and dismay, but even when it doesn't turn out so well, as the saying goes, "Bad choices make good stories."

The second direction taken to avoid death by comfort was to move in depth. Rather than pressing ourselves into new activities, the challenge here is to dive more deeply into the activities we already know. This option became clear to us on a holiday, while sitting on a deck and gazing across a lake as we had often done. As a little pastime, we began to ask each other to point out something special that the other had not seen. Within a short time this tranquil scene sprang to life. Birds were busily engaged in their curious social lives, shadows could be used to judge the time, subtle currents could be detected on the lake, and more. Since then we have come to appreciate how one friend's interest in playing the guitar led him into constructing string instruments, and another friend's fondness for photography spawned an intense interest in digital manipulation of photo images. Just behind each comfort couch lies a hidden path to wonderland.

These were but the musings of a summer's day. If you as a reader wish to share other ideas on challenging our comfort zones, please send your suggestions to us at gv4@psu.edu. We would love to share.

Mary and Ken Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

*** Is Laughter Really the Best Medicine?**

Is there actually a grain of truth in the old adage that "Laughter is the best medicine?" The results of a 15 year study of over 53,000 people conducted by Sven Svebak and his colleagues in Norway provide some interesting support. They discovered that humor can delay or prevent certain life-threatening diseases. The researchers measured the participants' sense of humor with a question included in a large health sur-

vey. Specifically they asked participants to estimate their ability to find something funny in most situations. Participants could then be categorized as high or low in this ability, and these groups compared on various health indicators. Results indicated that women who scored high on sense of humor experienced a reduced risk of premature death from cardiovascular and infectious diseases. Men who scored high had a reduced risk of early death from infections. The benefits gradually faded with increasing age and disappeared after age 85 possibly because the frowny-faces were no longer alive. In any case, as Svebak suggests, “This means that a higher than average sense of humor is no vaccine to protect you against death in the end, although it will increase your probability of getting old.”

There are many possible reasons for the correlation between humor and health. For example, “A friendly sense of humor will bless you with better social relations as well as coping skills, and the reduced risk of dying early,” says Svebak. And, “A friendly sense of humor acts like shock absorbers in a car, a mental shock absorber in everyday life to help us cope better with a range of frustrations, hassles and irritations.” As Edward Creagan, professor of medical oncology at the Mayo Clinic proposes, “When people are funny, they attract other people, and community connectedness is the social currency for longevity... Nobody wants to be around negative, whiny people. It’s a drain. We’re attracted to funny people.” So, if you can find humor in a given situation, be sure to share it. What a fun way to save lives, even your own.

From: Laughter really is the best medicine? In many ways, that’s no joke by Marlene Cimon, *Washington Post*, June 15, 2019

* **Counting Steps: Enough Already?**

Among our readers, many family members may be going around with a piece of “step counting” technology on their wrists. The goal of 10,000 steps is often cited as the gold standard for a healthy life. It is extremely hard for most people to reach this goal, but then guilt for being a lazy critter creeps into mind. Recent research questions this Spartan goal, and most of us will be happy to know that we can do

with fewer steps, and still be considered on the right side of the health gods.

A recent study by Harvard University researcher I-Min Lee, included 16,000 women in their 70's who wore step-tracking monitors for one week. None of the women was considered to be in "poor health." They could not see the monitors, and were thus unlikely to change their walking level to meet a specified criterion.

The results were striking: The figure of 2,700 steps proved to be a critical. Women who took less than this number of steps, were most likely to die within the next five years. Women who took more than this number of steps were significantly advantaged. For example, women who walked about 4,500 steps had a 40% less chance of premature death than someone walking less than 2,700.

However, after 7,500 steps, there was no advantage to walking more, in terms of longevity. Thus, it seems, taking anywhere between 3,000 and 7,000 steps is just fine. Nor does the rate of the walking seem to matter. Most of the women strolled, rather than rushed. Few walked for exercise, but mostly they walked to get from place to place. Readers who don't wear "fit-bits" might try counting the steps they take as they move about the house or apartment. We did so, and were surprised how rapidly the steps accumulate. However, we are also champions of a good walk, and specially moving about after an hour's sitting.

From: Fewer than 10,000 Steps may be All You Require, by Gretchen Reynolds. *New York Times International*, June 14, 6

*** Combatting Social Isolation and Loneliness**

This Newsletter has featured many reports on the problems of social isolation. Recent research provides finer detailing. First, while the bulk of existing research is concerned with the loneliness of those living alone, we now find that loneliness is not restricted to those who are socially isolated. Not only is it possible to live alone and not be lonely, people living together can also feel lonely. A 2017 study indicated that 2/3 of people who said they were lonely were married. Being married does not necessarily mean feeling socially connected or

nourished. Often, when one partner feels lonely, the other partner begins to feel lonely as well -- each burrowing into their own dark hole, feeling alienated from one another. Additional factors may especially affect older people, such as retiring from a job where social connections and emotional fulfillment have been available. When accidents, illnesses, cognitive difficulties, or loss of a partner occur, there are further challenges.

People's social needs should be a top priority, in terms of feelings of well-being. A national survey on end-of-life preferences found that up to 85 % of older adults and caregivers valued factors such as sharing time with close friends, being together with family members, being able to help others, and not being a burden to the family more than medical treatments. Activities that enhance connectedness are essential.

Today many community groups are creating interventions to help older people make meaningful relationships. Characteristics of successful programs are:

1. Adaptability. Letting people get involved according to their own preferences.
2. Community involvement. Enlisting the support of various groups to help in providing a range of opportunities.
3. Productive engagement: Challenging or physically engaging activities are better at creating connections than passive programs. Programs that foster a sense of purpose and meaningfulness are better than less interactive ones. It is better to be in a parade than standing on the sidelines watching it.

From: *Aging Today*, May-June, 2019

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

*** Mother Nature's Gift of Health**

Our mother's advice to go outside and play was well-taken. Recent research supports the view that spending time outside, especially where there is plenty of green, is indeed healthy. Being in nature can lower a person's stress, decrease blood pressure, and improve mental

health, among other things. City dwellers might ask, how much “nature” is enough for a busy person, living in a concrete world?

A study from *Scientific Reports* suggests that the answer is about 120 minutes a week. This research involved nearly 20,000 people living in England, who participated in a survey from 2014 to 2016. They recorded their activities each week. People who spent two hours a week or more outside reported being in better health and having a greater sense of well-being than those who didn’t get out. Interestingly, those who reported five hours a week or more in nature, did not gain any more for it.

This effect was true for all groups of people, including men and women, all age groups, different ethnic groups, those living in richer or poorer areas, and even for those with long term illnesses. In various countries, for example, Scotland, doctors are now prescribing outdoor activities as part of the health plan for some of their patients. In Sweden it is part of the normal life style of many citizens; in South Korea the government is establishing “healing forests” for their citizens.

An easy step for those of us who are advocating for positive aging is to proclaim the necessity for all of us to get outside, put our faces in the sun, gather some wild flowers, or simply stroll around admiring the beauty of the Earth.

From: A Healthy Breath of Fresh Air by Knvul Sheikh, *New York Times, International Edition*, June 21, 2019, 12

*** Jane Goodall at 85: Nature’s Best Friend**

When Jane Goodall was 26 years old, she went to Tanzania to study chimpanzees. From her close observations, she noted that the group she watched used a tool to extract termites from a log. Her reporting upset the usual viewpoint that only humans could use tools. She also discovered that chimps had complex social and family relations, sharp intelligence, and complex emotions. Since these early beginnings, Ms. Goodall dedicated herself to learning and caring about chimps, and promoting ways of protecting them in a fiercely competitive and ruthless world. She is highly concerned that what we are doing to the Earth is bringing us close to disaster. “If we don’t stop always putting

economic development over the needs of nature, the world will be a very very grim one. We depend on nature, on forests and oceans breathing out oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide.” Dedicated to her views that the world needs to be saved, Goodall, now 85, spends 300 days a year on the road, giving talks and helping people to understand how crucial it is that we stop choosing money making over all other things. Goodall is the founder of an Institute named after her, and she is a UN Messenger of Peace. Her Institute’s U. S. headquarters is in Washington, DC. Let us support her mission, for the chimps and for our grandchildren.

From: Jane Goodall by Sophie Brickman. *Elle*, July, 2019.

* **Back to Work for The Grande Dame of Documentaries**

Sheila Nevins has been an icon of documentary filmmaking for much of her life. In 2017 she retired from HBO after 40 years, with a lustrous list of credentials to her name. She was the creator of Oscar winning “Citizenfour”, (the story of Edward Snowden’s life as a fugitive), an expose of Scientology called “Going Clear”, and a raunchy series called “Taxicab Confessions”. She won a Peabody award for producing a cable program for “She’s Nobody’s Baby: The History of American Women in the 20th Century.” She also created “Real Sex”. To her credit are 1,500 other films, for which she received the Emmy Lifetime Achievement Award, which had never been given to a documentarian before.

From her own confession, she spent her whole life working. Her passion was making films, and she pushed those she mentored to consecrate themselves to their craft as well. She frowned on vacations, days off, and even honeymoons. Being one of the first women in her profession, she had to deal with the macho ethos that was the dominant culture in film-making. Recently Ms. Nevins wrote a memoir, *You Don’t Look Your Age and Other Fairy Tales*, which included a passage about her relationship to cosmetic enhancements. “I have enough Botox in me to detonate Iran.” She is still very keen to look her best, and has her hair

done three times a week. She says, “I’m held together by Elmer’s Glue, but I’m good in the dark.”

The latest news is that Sheila Nevins is back to work. She has been hired by MTV to start a nonfiction film and specials division. She will develop projects for the network, and also for outside vendors. Chris McCarthy, the President of MTV, is eager for her to share her wisdom with the young filmmakers who have not had the chance to see how the old pro makes it happen. It’s a whole new way to celebrate an 80th birthday.

From: *New York Times*, May 7, 2019; Dec. 16, 2017, Style

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

* Connie Zweig writes:

Hi Mary,
I enjoyed your last issue!
I'm wondering if you would offer links to a few of my new articles on Reinventing Age from the Inside Out:

Meeting my Inner Ageist:

<https://changingaging.org/disrupting-ageism/meeting-my-inner-bag-lady-an-encounter-with-my-own-ageism/>

Conflicting inner voices about retirement:

<https://www.nextavenue.org/whether-to-retire/>

Gratitude for your work, Connie

Editor’s Note:

Connie is the author or co-author of the following books:
Meeting the Shadow and Romancing the Shadow,
Meeting the Shadow of Spirituality,
A Moth to the Flame: The Life of Sufi Poet Rum

And forthcoming:

Reinventing Age from the Inside Out

* Fran Lyon-Dugin writes:

This is some work that a career coach in Minneapolis has been doing with clients who are over 60, on transitioning from career to the next phase. This could include a mix of employment, consulting, more personal time, what have you. It's quite interesting and people might enjoy his model and his latest blog series.

<https://georgedow.com/life-work-after-60-broader-possibilities-ahead/>

ANNOUNCEMENTS

***A New Open Access Journal**

Innovation In Aging. Oxford University Press.

<https://academic.oup.com/innovateage>

=====

*** **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: www.positiveaging.net

- How to subscribe, unsubscribe or change your e-mail address

New subscribers can join by visiting www.taosinstitute.net/positive-aging-newsletter

On the right column, you will see a blue box that says “Click Here to Sign Up” – click that and fill in your information and submit.

To change or unsubscribe, send an e-mail to: info@TaosInsitute.net