

THE TAOS INSTITUTE
Positive Aging



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

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*** COMMENTARY: Traveling Dark Valleys

For Mary and me, an orientation toward positive aging is not simply about staying on the bright side of life. It also means finding ways of traveling through the dark valleys of life without falling into despair, and discovering meaning even in the shadows. For me the past three weeks have been largely a journey through such a valley. A long-needed heart valve was replaced, and the surgery left me with pain, lost abilities, and many tedious and grim hours. I had never experienced serious surgery before, so I found myself without resources to move through this world in anything approximating a positive way. Slowly, however, with Mary as my conversational companion, I began to find some ways of confronting the daily challenges. I share five of these here, in hopes that others might find them useful:

Choose your comparisons: “How am I feeling” is a question frequently asked by others and myself. It is not an insignificant question, because how I answer can often affect my mood. The most important point is that “how I am feeling” can only be answered in comparison to some standard. Choosing the standard is crucial! If I use the standard of my pre-op life, I am plunged into a hole. I feel terrible! And, because there are many ups and downs across the days of recovery, it is important to select that moment that will allow me to draw a positive conclusion. “Compared to yesterday at this time...”, “Compare to last night when it took the nurse four tries to draw blood...” If I am careful to select the right moment of comparison, the day is that much brighter.

Friends and family are invitations to exit myself. When I am alone, my focus often remains on myself...conscious of each ache and pain, each sign that things may be going amiss. I live in a world of grey to black from which it is oh so difficult to imagine myself otherwise. Friends and family are powerful invitations to exit this pit. The important point is to shift the conversation as soon as possible away from myself, to their lives. As they speak about their dramas, I exit myself. I am caught up in their lives, living vicariously in worlds of significance and hope.

Search for the soft. One major problem with being a surgical patient, is the radical reduction in human touch. Not only did I resist others’ touching, feeling fragile as a patient, and fearful that one untoward touch would undo my incisions. But as well, visitors in general were very careful and tentative in their approach. Perhaps it is the caring security that accompanies touch, but its loss is significant. Thus I began to search for any form of garment, toweling, or other soft material – a substitute, for sure, but far better than nothing. For me, the

gift from the gods came in the form of a luxuriously soft, faux fur throw, a gift from my son and daughter-in-law. It has been a constant companion.

Enjoy the returns to childhood. The idea of maturity is frequently equated with autonomy. To grow up, is to learn self-sufficiency. This seems especially so for us males. Becoming a patient is thus akin to losing one's maturity. There is the silent but repeated echo, "You are such a baby..." But such thoughts were debilitating; the situation only became worsened. So, a reflection: what a wonderful opportunity to enjoy again some of the joys of immaturity! It was also gratifying to find that Mary, and the many others upon whom I have leaned, actually found meaning in this transition.

Forgive yourself. Before surgery I painted a picture of convalescence in which I would bask in the luxury of having time for activities too often shoved aside in the rush of daily life – reading, listening to music, catching up on correspondence, and the like. Thus, when I found myself after surgery little able to concentrate, continuously exhausted, and lacking any ambition, my initial impulse was self-criticism. I was turning into a vegetable! Then a reflection: were my hopes not just another repetition of the life-long voice on my shoulder, equating worth with productivity? The voice was now my enemy. I was later surprised to find how easy it was to enjoy a nap whenever needed.

I suspect that readers could offer many more, and possibly far better, ways of moving more resiliently through such dark periods. I often think there should be an international web-resource where people could share their many – otherwise private – ways of dealing with loss, depression, illness, and the like. Such a vision is itself uplifting.

Ken Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

*** Sweat Smart: Physical Activity and Mental Acuity**

A new study from researchers at UCLA has found additional evidence that physical activity is closely related to mental capacities. The Cardiovascular Health Study, begun in 1989, has followed almost 6,000 older people. The participants fill in forms regarding their medical and intellectual states, their lives and physical activities, and they also receive MRI scans of their brains. Looking at the data from the past ten years for 900 participants who were at

least 65, the researchers first calculated levels of physical activity for the entire sample, based on their answers to questionnaires. As the results showed, the top 25% of people who were most active also had the most gray matter in the memory and higher level thought parts of their brains (as revealed by MRI scans). And too, those people who had more gray matter had 50% less risk of having memory problems five years later. Of course, in itself this doesn't show that the physical activity contributed to grey matter, but it strongly suggests the possibility.

A second finding was more compelling: those people who had increased their physical activity within the past five year period showed notable increases in gray-matter volume in those parts of the brain. This finding is also important as it suggests it's never too late to improve one's brain. One can begin exercise tomorrow, with hope for cognitive improvement. Cyrus Raji, the leader of the study, suggested that physical activity is a very helpful way to avoid mental deterioration. In this study physical activity included gardening, ballroom dancing, walking, jogging, bike riding, and other physical pursuits. Interestingly, many of the physically active people in the study were only engaged in their sports and active hobbies a few times a week. So, it doesn't seem necessary to have a grueling schedule of physical activities to keep mentally fit.

From: Sweat Smart by Gretchen Reynolds, *New York Times*, Well, April 10, 2016, pg. 22.

*** The "Once a Week" Rule for Sex**

Tired or not, having sex with your long-term partner is a good idea. In one relevant study, surveys of more than 25,000 Americans collected over four decades found that one's feelings of well-being tended to increase with sexual frequency with a partner, up to once a week. However, it didn't seem to enhance these feelings if a couple had sex more than that. This study also found that there were no differences between genders in terms of sexual desire, and the "at least once a week" benefit applied regardless of the age of the couple or the length of their relationship.

In a fascinating variation on this study, researchers were interested in the degree to which a partner was motivated to have sex by his or her partner's wishes. Calling this a "sexual communal motive", they looked at the daily experiences of long-term couples for three weeks. They found that individuals who are motivated to meet their romantic partner's sexual needs experienced sexual benefits for themselves. For one, their own sexual desires increased. Wanting to please the other stimulated romantic feelings. Researchers found that men were more likely to satisfy their partner's sexual desires than women

were, and the longer a relationship had lasted, the more willing partners were to satisfy their mate. This willingness was unrelated to sexual frequency, whether they had children or the age of the partners. In sum, disclosure about sexual needs, wants, and desires seems to be an important way to promote sexual communal strength in ongoing relationships. Letting your partner know that you're interested in sex can be mutually rewarding.

From: Keeping the spark alive: Being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs sustains sexual desire in long-term romantic relationships by Amy Muise, Emily A. Impett, A. Kogan, & S. Desmarais. (2012). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Frequency predicts greater well-being, but more is not always better by Amy Muise, Ulrich Schimmack, & Emily A. Impett, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Online Nov. 18, 2015.

*** IN THE NEWS ***

* Give 15 Minutes, and Save a Life, Even Your Own

The 150-minutes per week of moderate-to-vigorous exercise set in the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans could be too much for some older adults. It could indeed discourage people from exercising. So proposed Dr. David Hupin, Department of Clinical and Exercise Physiology, University Hospital of Saint-Etienne, France. At the same time, for people over age 60, meeting these guidelines for moderate-to-vigorous exercise has been linked to a 28 percent lower risk of dying over 10 year period.

In the current study, Hupin's team looked at whether less exercise could be beneficial. They analyzed data from past studies covering a total of 122,417 men and women between the ages of 60 and 101 in the U.S., Taiwan and Australia. The studies evaluated participants' physical activity levels and their risk of dying from any cause over 10 years. They also factored in participants' self-reported health status, physical or mental illnesses, weight, cholesterol and other details.

As the results showed, both men and women benefited from some exercise. Older women, especially showed a greater benefit from some exercise. In the low-exercise category their mortality risk decreased by 32 percent, compared to men's 14 percent. One reason could be that women underestimated their exercise level and men overestimated theirs, the authors write.

"Scientific evidence is now emerging to show that there may be health benefits from light physical activity and from replacing sedentary activities with

light intensity activities,” Hupin said. “People must become less sedentary: cooking or working at a standing desk, rather than sitting. Dr. Hupin believes that even 15 minutes a day of brisk walking, cycling or swimming could help older adults live longer.

“Age is not an excuse to do no exercise,” he said.

SOURCE: bit.ly/1HEXnnpf *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, online August 3, 2015.

* **Aging is What You Make of It**

In the Sunday Review section of the *New York Time* on May 1, 2016, Gerald Marzorati wrote an article, “Practicing for a Better Old Age.” In it, he lamented his aging self, and mused that taking up tennis might help him to age more gracefully. His unenthusiastic tone prompted readers to resist. On May 9, several letters were published that seemed to rebut the major thrust of the article. Here are some of the highlights:

- “Gerald Marzorati at 63 is missing an important point. Aging isn’t just about losing capacities and about saving them with a new activity like tennis. It’s also about accepting and deepening who you are and using what you have to continue to learn and grow.Rather than a sense of loss, aging has brought many gratifications. I feel wiser and calmer. I think that this comes from consolidating a lifetime of experiences and using them to take you forward to face whatever challenges the next years will bring.” Sara Seiden.

- “Gerald Marzorati sounds more like a Debbie Downer than a guru on aging....Having survived cancer at an earlier age, I learned how even bad circumstances can be transformational and lead a person further down eternity’s road....I was also fortunate to have a number of positive role models for aging well. I remember my mother, who cleared snow from her sidewalk at 90. I never heard her complain about getting old....Indeed, a few of our presidential candidates are age roles as they undergo the rigors of a national campaign in their 60’s and 70’s, inspiring those much younger to trust them to run the country for the next four years.” Rebecca Fahrlander.

- “In 1996, when I was [61] I was just entering Peace Corps preservice training in Moldova. My husband and fellow trainee was 70. We felt like teenagers. After our close of service and for the next 19 years, we spent our ‘old age’ participating in activities like an archaeological dig at a site in Romania, work exchange programs in Ireland, Scotland, Croatia and Albania; home exchanges in Madrid and Amsterdam... I earned a master’s in English and American literature; he played in two bands.

My husband died 10 weeks ago at 89 of a stroke, until then as alert and ready for adventure, as he was when I met him. If you feel old at 63, Mr. Marzorati, how will you feel at 80, 85, or 90?" Lee Norris

- "I'm doing Ping-Pong and less running. (I'm 93)." Barbara Rosenthal.

From: Aging is what you make of it. *New York Times* Editorials/Letters, May 9, 2016.

*** Teaching Yoga at 97**

Taaο Porchon-Lynch, 97, is a yoga teacher in Scarsdale, New York. She actively engages in easily moving into all the yoga positions, and can even suspend herself above the floor, supported only by her arms. "Feel your whole body singing out, and hold," she encourages her students. She has been teaching yoga for decades, but that is not the only activity in which she engages. Before this class she had spent two hours doing ballroom dancing. In her 80's she began competitive ballroom dancing and has even appeared on "America's Got Talent". Her partner for some dance competitions is 70 years younger than she.

Her mother died giving birth to her on a ship in the English Channel in 1918 near the end of World War I. Originally raised in India by an aunt and uncle, she traveled widely as a child. At 8 she began practicing yoga. Her father was from France, and she lived there during World War II. She and her aunt hid refugees from the Nazis as part of the French resistance movement. Later in London she became a cabaret dancer, and learned English with a friend, Noel Coward. She hung out with famous people, including Ernest Hemingway and Marlene Dietrich. She marched with Gandhi and later Martin Luther King, Jr. as a protester. Her philosophy seems to be, "Whatever you put in your mind materializes. Within yourself there's an energy, but unless you use it, it dissipates. And that's when you get old."

She has had three hip replacements in her day, and gets around driving in her Smart car. She is a longtime widow with no children. She attributes her long life to keeping her energies flowing, and waking up each morning with the positive attitude that each day will be her best. She is a vegetarian and a wine lover, and believes in wearing high heels.

From: Longevity Pose by Corey Kilgannon, *New York Times*, June 5, 2016, 4.

*** BOOK REVIEW***

* *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path of Living Your Best Life at Every Age*, by Jo Ann Jenkins (2016). Perseus Books.

In her new book, Jo Ann Jenkins, the CEO of AARP, has written about challenging the negative stereotypes that permeate the air we breathe. She describes birthday cards she received on her 50th birthday:

- “Happy 50th _You’re now officially over the hill.”

- “Relax! Turning 50 doesn’t mean you’re an old geezer... It means you’re a *young* geezer.”

- “You’re not losing it – you’re just not using it as often.”

Jenkins notes the tension that arises as people desire to live a long life, but without getting old. We do live longer, healthier and more productive lives, which is wonderful, but we also change in terms of our bodies, our appearances, our interests, and our skills. How do we manage our new selves? From her perspective these are important ideas about aging:

Aging is just living. There are ups and downs, just as there have been in other times of life.

There are 100 million shades of gray. What Jenkins means is that people age differently depending on their gender, race, ethnicity and also locale, educational level, and income.

Older people are contributors, not burdens. Often the argument is made that older people are a drain on the economy. She argues that older people account for more than \$7 trillion in U. S. annual economic activity.

Aging and longevity spur innovation. Aging people expect and demand products and services. Companies that innovate win profits.

Bonus time. Because of our longer life expectancies and technological advances, many of us will have 30 bonus years of growth and exploration. Herein lie exciting opportunities.

READERS RESPOND

* Ashton Applewhite writes:

“This Chair Rocks”: A Blog by Ashton Applewhite

I’ve written a book. I blog about it. I have a Q & A blog called Yo, Is This Ageist? (Go ahead, ask me.) I’ve written a consciousness-raising booklet. And I speak widely. All tools to help catalyze a movement to make discrimination on the basis of age as unacceptable as any other kind.

<https://thischairrocks.com>

*****ANNOUNCEMENTS*****

* August 25-27, 2016: International Conference on Positive Aging. Washington, DC., Capitol Hilton, Sponsored by Society of Certified Senior Advisors and Fielding Graduate University

* August 8-9, 2016: International Conference on Aging and Gerontology. Las Vegas, Nevada.

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***** Information for Readers *****

We hope that you enjoy reading 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

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Past issues of the newsletter, including our translated issues in Spanish, German, French, Danish, Portuguese, and Chinese are archived at: www.positiveaging.net

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