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## THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

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Issue 102

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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: Good Living = Good Stories**

A colleague of ours, Dan McAdams, wrote a book entitled *The Stories We Live By*. As he proposed, we understand our lives largely as stories, and these influence the way we live. Some people may see themselves on a quest, some as rebounding from a misfortune, some as seeking redemption, and so on. However, we are not always thinking about our grand life story. Every day is filled with smaller stories about how the day is going: is a project we are working on making progress; did that phone call with my daughter go well; are we getting into an argument? We are cheered when the story moves in a successful direction, and frustrated or depressed when we see it fail.

The two of us have found this emphasis on stories very helpful in moving well through each day. There is first the very fact that we can see what we are doing in terms of stories. When we play badly at a sport, use bad judgment in driving, or forget to do something we promised to do, we often feel like failures ...sometimes for hours. But the reason we feel bad is not the event itself; it is the story we are telling about these things. Losing is not so bad when you can say, "It was only a game." An inability to accomplish a goal is less depressing when you can laugh at yourself as "someone who bit off more than could be chewed." If we can see how we are caught up in the stories, we are free to suspend them.

Better still, we are free to find alternative stories. One of our favorite ways of removing some of the nails in the road of daily life is switching to more promising stories. When there is an annoying incident, for example, one of us might say, "but look at this beautiful day and all we did achieve. What happened was trivial." We were once scammed, an incident that greatly bothered us for weeks...until we could slowly begin to focus on a story that was the result of wanting too much to help someone we loved. Even in the midst of a harrowing event, one can say, "What good story this will make." The good life is often about finding a good story.

Ken and Mary Gergen

## \*\*\*RESEARCH\*\*\*

### \* **Friendship: Another Benefit of Optimism in Aging**

In previous Newsletters, we have reported on a number of studies indicating that positive expectations of aging were good for you. For example, people who look forward to their later years live much longer than those who are pessimistic about aging. The present study adds another dimension. As people age, move out of their old neighborhoods, retire from work, or become less active and outgoing, they lose contact with their old friends. Some die as well. Yet, research continues to show that caring connections are important for health and well-being into old age. This research was interested in whether our expectations about aging could affect relations as we age. Is it possible that expectations of being lonely, would lower our motivation to seek new friends - that we could develop a "what's the use?" attitude? In contrast, if we have positive expectations, we might seek out new friends as we move to new locations.

To explore these possibilities, a study was done with a large sample of older Black women from Baltimore. A major finding was that participants' baseline expectations about aging were significantly related to their social networks 2 years later. Those who had positive expectations about aging developed more new friends than those who had negative ones. These were not necessarily close friends, but they were people who were counted on as part of one's social network.

Also, more positive expectations about aging were associated with greater feelings of social support, compared to those with more negative expectations.

These findings not only suggest that keeping a positive attitude leads to greater social support, but that indirectly it will improve health in later life.

From: Positive expectations regarding aging linked to more new friends in later life by J. A. Menkin, T. F. Robles, T. L. Gruenewald, E. K. Tanner, & T. E. Seeman. *J. Gerontol B. Psychol Sci Soc Sci*, 2017, 72, 771-781.

### \* **Social Engagement and Longevity**

We have reported in earlier newsletters that married people are likely to live longer than singles. The present research adds another dimension to the link between social relatedness and long life. Psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad, from Brigham Young University, undertook an analysis of 148 research studies published over 28 years to see if there was a relationship between the level of so-

cial engagement (which she called “popularity”) and longevity. She defined popularity in terms of the size of someone’s friendship network, whether one lived alone, and how often one participated in social activities.

Holt-Lunstad’s analyses indicated that across all the studies, those with large social networks, living with others, and who had high participation in social activities lived longer than those less socially engaged. People who had larger networks of friends increased their chance of survival by the end of the study by 50% over those who had fewer friends. Most interesting from our standpoint, those who had good-quality relationships had a 91% higher survival rate than those who had poor ones. Being socially disengaged increased the chances of death more strongly than obesity, physical inactivity or binge drinking. Only smoking was as detrimental to one’s health as being socially isolated.

There are many possible reasons for these high correlations. Most obviously, people who are not in good health, possibly shut in, may not have opportunities for social engagement. Also, when there is high social engagement, people are also much more physically active. And as the saying goes, “use it or lose it.” Close friends are also likely to encourage you to see a doctor when you have symptoms, and to take care of yourself. But the findings on the quality of one’s social relationships are most interesting because none of these more obvious reasons provide a good explanation. Is it possible that simply being happier in one’s relationships has effects on one’s physical system? Other research does indicate the relationships based on kindness, and selfless generosity leads to relationships that confer the greatest health benefits. We shall look forward to future research on this topic.

From: Popular People Live Longer by Mitch Prinstein, *New York Times*, June 4, 2017, SR 10.

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

**\* Looking on the Sunny Side, Even if Poor**

What difference might having a positive view on aging make, if someone has a very insecure financial situation? In this study, researchers compared two groups of people. Those who were designated as living in “precarious circumstances” vs. those whose situation was considered “secure.” This study, done in Germany, included about 2,000 people, who were called secure, and about 250 who were labeled precarious. The average age of the participants in the study was 55. Measured for their physical health, well-being and behavioral, social

and psychological resources, the secure individuals were much better off than the precarious ones. Well-being was particularly distinguished as something secure people felt, vs. precarious ones. Those people who were classified as precarious had diverse ideas about aging. Most important, those people who took a positive view on aging were better off than those who did not. They rated themselves as having a higher sense of well-being, than those who did not view aging positively. They also were more likely to engage in physical activity, had more friends, and were more open to making the most of their resources for a positive old age.

From: Aging in Precarious Circumstances: Do Positive Views on Aging Make a Difference by Catrinel Craciun, Paaul Gellert, & Uwe Flick. *The Gerontologist*, 2017, 57, 517-528.

### \* **Cheery at 95**

The Queen of England, Elizabeth II, has celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her husband, Prince Philip, is 95, and has just announced his official retirement from Royal duties. The Queen continues to reign, make official visits, ride horses, hold state banquets, and wear elegant clothes. She is among the growing % of the population in the UK that is 85 plus. In the meantime, a longitudinal study by Professor Carol Jagger of Newcastle University involving 200 people over 85 indicated that while a minority were lonely, mostly when widowed, most got cheerier over time. The group is now 95, and irrespective of income, many are independent, able to dress and walk on their own. Half of them exercise for enjoyment, 20% belong to clubs and 10% are helping others. “What matters is that they are firmly connected to family and friends,” says Jagger.

From: Britons at 90 – Healthier, wiser, more independent, but it helps if you are rich. By Yvonne Roberts. *The Guardian*. Sent to us by a British friend.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/17/britons-at-90-healthier-wiser-independent-rich-queen>

### \* **The Older, Wiser, Fiercer Blog of Carol Orsborn**

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#### **WHAT IS THE BLOG ABOUT?**

*Older, Wiser, Fiercer* is both a meditation and chronicle of my journey to becoming fierce with age in our perilous times.

***Seven Key Themes:***

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## **WE WHO ARE OLD**

*The true nature of aging to those of us living it*

What is age to those of us living it? Earlier in our lives, we had expected either to continue on as is forever, punctuated by a hard stop at the end, or to fade away gently into the dark night. We did not expect to be facing a new threshold, feeling more alive than ever. The irony nearly breaks us, as we leapfrog through the mystery of age one paradox at a time.

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## **THE TENSION OF RELATEDNESS**

*The paradox between wanting to belong and the desire for solitude*

What is the challenge of loving others at the intersection of old age and our perilous times? Never have we had more to share, and never have we felt more marginalized. We struggle with our wanting to belong—and the desire for solitude. Paradoxically, it is on the margins that we develop new capacities to not only experience our greatest love, but to discover that we are beloved.

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## **OUR TIMES**

*The state of the world in our culminating moment*

It is not easy to be old in these times, wishing one had done or could do more. We aim to be the bigger person, but why do so many people have to be asleep, stupid, selfish and just plain bad? What are our obligations and limitations, navigating a world that has clearly spun out of our control?

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## **FIERCE WITH AGE**

*Growing not only old but whole*

What are the barriers and complexities of what it takes to become one's authentic self? We look to our shadow, reclaiming much of what we'd rejected about ourselves and our lives as well as jettisoning previously useful aspects that we've outgrown. At our age, this very triumph of the spirit is often dismissed by others as "eccentric" or "cranky." We fear rejection, but come to realize that in becoming more fully ourselves, we are not just being difficult, we are becoming whole.

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## **DEFEAT AND VICTORY**

*What is lost, what is gained through aging*

What is the relationship between suffering and spiritual growth? How ironic it is that the things we fear most can become catalysts for what we most value: the deepest appreciation of life, the greatest capacity for joy and the unspeakable grace of a heart broken open.

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## **THE LEGACY OF BEING**

*Anticipated regret and unexpected passion*

Legacies are both personal and generational. Where have we succeeded, and where have we fallen short? I confess that I so believed in our generation's commitment to love and justice, I was certain that zeitgeist would do the heavy lifting for us. Not anymore. My misguided faith in the trajectory of history has at last grown teeth. Words are being voiced that should have been spoken years ago.

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## **THE MEASURE OF OUR LIVES**

*Why our last days matter most*

I believe I have prepared myself for a good death. But secretly, I wonder whether I will maintain my trust that I am beloved by God, or will I spoil the end hoping for reward and fearing punishment? For the time being, I believe that it must all be for something—lessons learned, pain endured, kindness given and received, courage summoned and forgiveness levied. This, in fact, is the essence of what it means to be older, wiser, fiercer.

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**NOTE:** *You are encouraged to share your thoughts with me and our community about this new direction for the blog and your own journey to becoming fierce with age in the **comment section** at the end of this and each entry as it is posted at [CarolOrsborn.com](http://CarolOrsborn.com).*

**For a free subscription to *Older, Wiser, Fiercer*, click [HERE](#)**

**To read more about the blog, click [HERE](#)**

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## **\*\*\* WEB RESOURCES**

\* **GLOBAL POSITIVE AGING.** The "Pass It On Network" is an international network promoting positive aging. Learn more at:  
<http://passitonnetwork.org/>

\* Sent to us by Dawn Dole:

<http://vimeo.com/31733784>

A friend made a short video of her friend, Maia, in the morning, doing yoga. A lovely and relaxing Scandinavian scene, with a special ending.

**\*\*\*READERS RESPOND\*\*\***

\* Marsha McDonough writes:

Hi Mary,

You might enjoy seeing this website <http://www.agingiscool.com/>

It's the hub of a cutting edge group of folks in Austin who are organizing ways for elders to connect in person in lots of different ways. What a great idea and it seems to be taking off like wildfire. Your readers might be inspired to start something similar in their towns.

A client shared it with me and I shared your newsletter with her. My client is excited to add your newsletter to the resource page of "aging is cool". Thanks to you and Ken for keeping your positive aging project going, Marsha

Marsha McDonough, Ph.D.

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\* Kathryn Lee writes:

We're delighted to make you aware of the first-ever conference on ageing well to be held in South Australia, Australia this November 2017.

With an emphasis on the business and social innovation of modern ageing, the conference program has been designed to inspire businesses at the international, national and state level to identify and engage with the burgeoning opportunities in the Ageing Well sector across multiple industries.

<http://ageingwellrevolution.com.au>

Kathryn [kathryn@luminoevents.com.au](mailto:kathryn@luminoevents.com.au)

\* Kristen Domonell writes about her article on how bodies get better with age:

Hello Gergens!

Here is that article you contributed to: <https://www.silversneakers.com/blog/4-ways-your-body-gets-better-with-age/>

Thanks for your help! Kristen

\* Jacob Klein

Hello There,

Love that you provide resources from around the web for people with disabilities! Thought this would be a helpful addition to your resources page: <https://sportfacts.org/guide-to-attending-a-ballgame-for-disabled-special-needs-senior-citizens/>

I found it quite useful and informative as a father with a special needs child. Hope you can use it.

Thanks again, Jacob <[kleinja@gmail.com](mailto:kleinja@gmail.com)>

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\*\*\*ANNOUNCEMENTS\*\*\*

**\*A New Open Access Journal**

- ***Innovation In Aging***. Oxford University Press.  
[Academic.oup.com/innovateage](http://Academic.oup.com/innovateage)

March 1-4, 2018. Association for Gerontology in Higher Education Annual Meeting and Educational Leadership Conference.  
Atlanta, GA

- Join Jane Giddan, Mary Gergen, and Ellen Cole for a “Week in Dialogue with the Authors” as they discuss their three books:
  - 70Candles! Women Thriving in the 8th Decade
  - Positive Aging: Dog Days with a Bone and other Essays
  - Retiring But Not Shy

- November 6 – 10<sup>th</sup> with a live webinar on Friday, Nov. 10<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 AM US Eastern time.
- Monday – Thursday of this week be in dialogue with the authors virtually on a community blog space, and then on Friday, join the live webinar. Open and free to the public.
- For information and to join in visit:
  - <https://taoslearning.ning.com/conversations/dialogue-with-the-authors-gergen-giddan-cole-positive-aging>
- Join the learning community first at: <https://taoslearning.ning.com>.

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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](mailto: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](http://www.positiveaging.net)

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