It Takes a Lifetime to Grow Old

Most of us want to live a long time, but few of us want to get old. Old age is equated with physical decline, mental deterioration and social isolation. No matter how we try to romanticize old age as the golden years, the challenges that come with aging seem insurmountable. As Betty Davis once said, “Old age ain’t no place for sissies.” In spite of the difficulties that are a natural part of the aging process, the last stage of life also has many rewards, and while change is an inevitable part of aging, deterioration does not have to be. Research studies indicate that many older people report high levels of life satisfaction and describe themselves as healthy. Research has also shown that healthy old age does not just happen. It is the result of planning, and of habits developed over a life time that result in good physical health, optimistic attitude, and strong social connections.

Healthy old age appears to be related to a combination of factors. One of these is the ability to adapt to the physiological, psychological and social changes of aging. The physiological changes affect every body system causing function to slow down and resulting in more vulnerability to disease. For example, decreased muscle and bone mass means that the older person is less vigorous, has less stamina, and is more susceptible to falls and injury. Decreased levels of neuroreceptors in the brain of older people slow their reaction time, and decrease immediate and short term recall. Changes to the lining of the stomach and intestine, decreases in digestive enzymes, and slowed peristalsis can result in indigestion, constipation and heart burn. Changes to the eye cause more vulnerability to glaucoma and cataracts.

Good physical health and functioning contribute to a robust sense of well-being in old age. While the body systems slow down and change as they age, disease is not an inevitable part of aging. Avoidance of chronic disease and disability is the result of a lifetime of good health habits. Enjoying a healthy diet, maintaining optimal weight, and regularly engaging in physical activity are habits that ensure good health if adhered to consistently throughout life. Regular health, dental and optometric examinations are effective strategies for early detection and treatment of potential functional problems. People can push themselves to develop in ways that maintain good functioning by inviting physical and cognitive challenges, such as learning a new language or walking instead of driving. Healthy habits contribute to a healthy old age whenever they are started but they contribute most if they have been developed early in life.

Adjustment to the psychological and social changes that come with aging can be even more challenging for the older person than the physical adaptations. Retirement and empty nest syndrome initiate role changes that can cause the individual to begin to re-evaluate his/her life. Resilient souls will develop new fulfilling roles, perhaps through grand-parenting or volunteer work. Some may even capitalize on past expertise by developing careers as consultants, or turn hobbies into paying ventures. Whatever direction it takes, successful adaptation to these changes brings with it a sense of purpose and meaning, social connection, and active engagement in life.

Loss of a spouse or other significant relationship by death or separation requires large amounts of adaptive resources for the older person, as well. A relationship developed over decades becomes a part of an individual’s sense of self and their place in the world. Loss of that relationship can be disruptive and disorienting for an extended period of time. Without adequate support, older people who are bereaved can lose their sense of meaning, withdraw and become socially isolated. The result is a downward spiral into depression, decreased physical function and loss of independence. Supportive relationships with friends and family can make the difference between successful recovery from bereavement and profound physical and mental decline.

Supportive social and family relationships have, in fact, been associated with all aspects of healthy aging. Whether or not an older person is able to successfully adapt to physical and functional changes is often determined by the quantity and quality of their relationships. Family and friends can help with some of the more difficult physical tasks of everyday life, intervene in complicated financial, legal or personal matters, or just offer a friendly contact on a regular basis. Without this kind of support, many older people, particularly those without a spouse, would not be able to effectively cope with the stresses of daily life.

As well as providing the physical and emotional support needed for adaptation to stress and change, strong relationships help to develop a sense of connectedness vital to good psychological and spiritual health. Some theorists believe that connectedness or sense of belonging is an essential ingredient in quality of life, and that it forms the basis of all human existence. In one study, older adults who were asked about their perception of successful aging included items such as having friends and family who are there for me, staying involved with the world and people around me, not feeling lonely or isolated, and feeling good about myself. It certainly appears to be true, at least for older people, that no man is an island.

Having a healthy social network does not happen by chance, however, particularly at a stage of life when peers and siblings may not survive. It takes foresight and planning to build intergenerational relationships that will last into later life. Developing and maintaining a social network of family and friends takes time and attention but is a good investment in well-being in old age.

A sense of connectedness can also be nourished through engagement in meaningful activity. People need to contribute to society in ways that are meaningful for them, and are in line with their personal values. This is often a challenge for older people who have retired from a lifelong occupation and do not know who they are apart from their job. Creativity in old age can be enhanced by early developing passions outside of paid work. Engagement in hobbies or meaningful volunteer interests provides a source of purposeful activity after retirement from paid employment. It may also be possible to plan for paid work that can realistically be carried out well into old age.

Maintaining a sense of control over life is as important as connectedness in achieving a healthy old age. It is essential that older people have the ultimate say in decisions that concern their lives. Even people with cognitive disability need to be included in decision making. Having your wishes listened to is more likely to happen if you have planned early on for financial security in old age and if you have taken legal strategies such a preparation of a will, power of attorney, and advance directives. Time spent in self reflection and decision making about what is important, what goals should be accomplished, and what relationships are most significant in old age can pay dividends in peace of mind and sense of direction when life changes become inevitable. As well, learning to take chances and the development of an inquiring mind and a spirit of adventure are likely to add to self-determination, sense of control and resilience.

Growing old is all about change. The ability to adapt to change is developed over the years and relies on qualities such as a positive outlook, strong social networks, being active and engaged with life, and a sense of personal control. People who accept and make the most of the aging process are those who can role with the waves of life. They are the people, who have planned for old age by developing healthy habits, caring for their relationships, opening themselves to creativity and adventure, and protecting their personal wishes through legal and financial means.

Getting old is definitely not for sissies. Healthy aging is the result of continuous self-development, a purposeful determination to grow, learn and experience which is started early in life and is supported by self-determination, optimism, engagement, connection, creativity and good physical functioning. It takes a lifetime to grow old and you are never too young to begin thinking about old age.