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## How to Change Your Mind-Set About Aging

People who think positively about getting older often live longer, healthier lives. Here is how to reconsider your perspective.



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At a pool party this summer, Johnnie Cooper climbed onto the diving board, executed a perfect dive and then joined a raucous game of Marco Polo. The occasion? Her 90th birthday.

“I’ve always looked forward to this age,” said Ms. Cooper, who lives in Huntsville, Ala., and is retired from the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command. “You no longer have a lot of the struggles you had. There’s a lot more peace.”

Her enthusiasm for getting older could be part of the reason she has lived such a long, rich life. While everyone’s experience with aging is different, experts are increasingly finding that having a positive mind-set is associated with aging well.

A decades-long study of 660 people published in 2002 showed that those with positive beliefs around getting older lived seven and a half years longer than those who felt negatively about it. Since then, research has found that a positive mind-set toward aging is associated with lower blood pressure, a generally longer and healthier life and a reduced risk of developing dementia. Research also shows that people with a more positive perception of aging are more likely to take preventive health measures — like exercising — which, in turn, may help them live longer.

You can’t stop the march of time, but you don’t have to dread it. Here are some ways to help shift your thinking.

### Notice where your age beliefs come from.

From the crotchety neighbor to the clueless Luddite, negative stereotypes of aging are everywhere. Taking in negative beliefs about aging can affect our view of the process — and our health, said Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology at Yale and the author of “Breaking the Age Code: How Your Age Beliefs Determine How Long and Well You Live.” A 2009 study, for example, found that people in their 30s who held negative stereotypes of aging were significantly more likely to experience a cardiovascular event, like a heart attack or stroke, later in life than those with positive ones.

To change your negative age beliefs, you first need to become more aware of them, Dr. Levy said. Try a week of “age belief journaling,” in which you write down every portrayal of an older person — whether in a movie, on social media or in a conversation. Then question if that portrayal was negative or positive, and whether the person could have been presented differently. Simply identifying the sources of your conceptions about aging can help you gain some distance from negative ideas.

“People can strengthen their positive age beliefs at any age,” Dr. Levy said. In one 2014 study, 100 adults — with an average age of 81 — who were exposed to positive images of aging showed both improved perceptions of aging and improved physical function.

### Find aging role models.

If you associate aging with only loss or limitation, “you’re not getting the full picture of what it means to age,” said Regina Koepp, a psychologist who specializes in aging. Instead, she said, “shift your attention — look around for role models, see who’s doing it well.”

That “doesn’t have to be a person who’s 90 diving off a diving board,” Dr. Koepp said. It might just be someone who attends a yoga class every week or volunteers for a cause.

Dr. Levy recommends coming up with five older people who have done something you deem impressive or have a quality that you admire, whether it’s falling in love later in life, showing devotion to helping others or maintaining a commitment to physical fitness.

## Don’t mistake forced positivity for optimism.

Research suggests that optimistic women are more likely to live past 90 than less optimistic women, regardless of race or ethnicity. But thinking more positively about aging doesn’t mean papering over real concerns with happy thoughts — or using phrases like “You haven’t aged!” as a compliment.

“The platitudes don’t work — we’ve heard them, they’re trite, they’re tone-deaf,” said Melinda Ginne, 74, a psychologist in the San Francisco Bay Area who specializes in aging.

Instead, try to look at the honest reality with optimism. If you’re feeling deflated that your tennis game isn’t as strong in your 70s as it once was, Dr. Ginne said, remind yourself: “No, I can’t play tennis like I did when I was 50, and I can only play for 10 minutes. But I can still play.”

## Challenge your own fears about getting older.

To feel more positive about aging, Dr. Koepp said, examine what worries you have about the process and then reflect on how troubling those concerns actually are.

For example, Dr. Koepp, 47, has been having an issue with her left hip. “I’ll say I’m old because I feel stiff and creaky,” she said. “But then I think, Well, my right hip isn’t stiff and creaky, and it’s the same age.”

The point is that while getting older may be contributing to her hip pain, she said, it’s not the only factor. “But we conflate age and disability, and I think that scares people,” she said.

## Don’t dismiss the benefits.

Focus on what you’re gaining, too. Research has shown, for example, that emotional well-being generally increases with age, and certain aspects of cognition, like conflict resolution, often improve in later life.

With time, “we’re likely to develop more resilience,” Dr. Koepp said. Successful aging doesn’t mean you won’t get sick, encounter loss or require care at some point, she said. And no one said that changing any mind-set is easy. But if you can, she added, it may allow you to see yourself more clearly “as a person with lived experience and wisdom” as you age.

Holly Burns is a frequent contributor to The New York Times.

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