

E-BOOK

THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF

Aging

THE MAGIC OF
GRACEFUL AGING



Introduction

I'm sure it's safe to say we'd all like to stay young forever or, at the very least, much longer than we do.

We'd all like our bodies to be in tip-top condition, our skin smooth and soft, and our minds sharp and fast for as long as possible.

But what can the science behind aging tell us about how we age and how to do so gracefully?



Why We Age

The human body is a remarkably complex machine.

Every time we receive a cut or a bruise, our own cells repair the damage and, in the case of muscle fiber damage, make it, so the tissue is stronger than before.

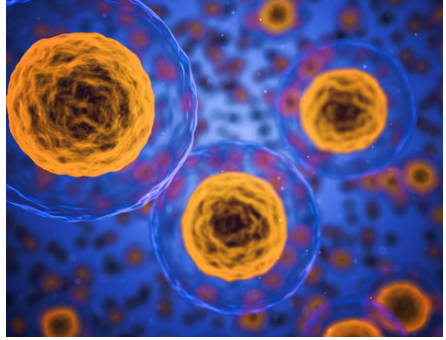
However, this cell mitosis and extraordinary function wear out over time.

This is not to say that modern medicine hasn't vastly improved both our quality and quantity of life.



There are many theories about why exactly this process has diminishing return over time, but one of the leading ones concerns the so-called “free radicals.”

Free radicals are unstable particles released in the body from normal processes like the breakdown of food or from carcinogens, such as smoking or ingesting toxic chemicals/foods.



Over time, these highly reactive particles damage our cells little by little, specifically their ability to multiply efficiently or sometimes multiply at all.

So, now that we know why we age, what can we do about it?

Well, for starters, antioxidant-rich foods, such as berries, carrots, spinach, broccoli, and the like, are an easy and delicious way of slowing down some of the worse effects of aging.

Avoiding processed foods or large quantities of processed red and fatty meat is also a great way to prevent serious complications in the long term.

Smoking, of course, should stay out of the picture for a multitude of reasons, not just those concerning aging.



But although often said, it really cannot be understated just how good physical exercise is for staying in good shape throughout your entire life.

A myth often implicitly perpetuated in people's minds is that fitness translates into toned, buff young models in their 20s and 30s, or gargantuan bodybuilders, oiled up and prime for a competition.

This couldn't be further from the truth, as not only do very simple and honestly fun exercises net great benefits for people of all shapes and sizes, but it isn't that difficult for people in their middle age or even older to exercise and retain good control of their body and strength.

In fact, studies show that a higher proportion of muscle mass is correlated with a much lower risk of cancer and organ-related problems in advanced age.

Things as simple as doing stretches on a regular basis, lifting light weights, and even going for walks and jogs can literally start improving your quality of life today.

No supplements or special diets required!

And a little personal tip from me - if you're bored on long walks or runs, download an audiobook or podcast to listen to so you can get smarter as you get stronger.

What To Do In Old Age?

With a culture increasingly placing more emphasis on looks, aesthetics, rapid-fire socialization, and keeping in touch with trends, one might feel discouraged at the prospect of aging.

After all, it seems as though we more and more relegate old and even just older people to categories such as boring and out of touch.

Many older men and women might also feel that their prime is behind them and grow bitter with regret as each year passes.

Psychologist Charlotte Bühler, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, described the four types of humans in relation to when they achieved their highest accomplishments.



The first two aren't quite relevant to the topic at hand, describing people who peak early in life (typically athletes) and those who peak at their middle age (many types of scientists).

What we're interested in are the latter two types - those who peak late in life and those who have an even distribution of accomplishments throughout the entire span of their life.

Those in the third category are people like Otto von Bismarck, the father of modern Germany, who, through a lifetime of patient diplomacy, skilled strategy, and accurate analysis of 19th century Europe's political landscape, united the German people without even being a king or an emperor.



People like John D. Rockefeller, a business mogul, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, whose ventures succeeded only later in life, or great thinkers like Kant and Hegel, who only wrote their wisdom after a lifetime of experience and thought.

On the other hand, people in the fourth category with accomplishments throughout their entire lifespan are typically actors, artists, and writers.

Michelangelo, Mozart, Al Pacino, Leonardo DiCaprio, Isaac Asimov and many others.

What this research tells us is that it is never too late to create one's own magnum opus.

Yes, there are limiting factors - you're not likely to win the Superbowl or qualify for the FIFA World Cup at age 57.

But for almost any other trade or craft, old age can sometimes even be a gift, with more free time to write, compose music or pursue one's passion.



A Time To Give Back

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson outlines in his theory of psychosocial development seven psychosocial crises a person goes through over the course of their life.

These crises are clashes between opposing tendencies that exert force on us during specific periods of our lives.

For example, Erikson's 6th crisis - that of early adulthood, is a clash between intimacy and isolation, with both forces being necessary in healthy amounts for a fruitful life.



Should one be too intimate, they can latch onto the other person, become dependent, even with the best and most loving intentions, and in turn drive their partner away in the process.

The opposite case would be to become bitter and embittered with rejection, not developing the necessary emotional and social behaviors and experiences that lead to one's ability to create a family.



The way a person successfully resolves such a crisis is to balance both forces and learn to extrapolate qualities from them both, thus creating a new virtue or skill, which in this case would be love.

Now, as comforting and heartwarming a stereotype as the wise grandfather, telling inspiring stories to his grandkids and the kind grandmother baking the most delicious cookies are, there also exists the polar opposite.

Unfortunately, I'm sure we've all seen resentful, bitter, and pessimistic people nagging and complaining at every little thing that doesn't go their way, somehow wielding the ability to turn even good news into bad.

Outwardly, this may just seem like what psychologists would call "having an external locus of control."

Basically, what this means is that a person attributes their successes and failures to either themselves (an internal locus of control) or outside factors.

In the case of the sour old man, this would sound something like "I'm miserable because my kids hate me and never want to visit" or "my pension is small because the government keeps paying minorities."



However, according to Erikson, middle and advanced adulthood have a very crucial psychosocial crisis, which may explain why this happens much better.

Usually, by the time a person's children leave for college or other prospects comes the time for Erikson's 7th crisis - a battle between generativity and stagnation.

What this translates to is, on one side, a feeling of purposelessness, whether it be personal or professional.

The cold thoughts of not being needed anymore and being past one's physical prime.

Or for women, starting to lose one's conventional beauty.

On the other hand, the feeling of generativity is described as the need to give back to the community.

This could be anything from helping out one's own biological offspring, community and neighborhood efforts, teaching, or even participating in politics.

The research on why exactly people feel this way at this particular age points to people's subconscious need for virtual immortality.

Sure, we can't literally live forever, but if we raise our children right, if we manage to imprint a part of ourselves in them, or a piece of art or even change the world, for example, we live on through that.



This directly feeds into Erikson's next and last psychosocial crisis - integrity versus despair.

Essentially, looking back at the end of our journey and reflecting on how we did.

Did we leave the world a better or worse place than when we found it?

How will our coworkers, our friends, our lovers, and our family remember us?

Will they even remember us, did our actions leave an impact after all, and could we have done anything differently?

One can now clearly understand how an honest answer to these questions might pull us down and reveal that we may have fooled ourselves into masking actions and beliefs all our lives and right before the grave, no less.

That is despair. That is how we become miserable - when we are at our most powerless.

And when we give up on any hope of trying to salvage respect and meaning, the only thing we have is lashing out and spitting acid just before the bitter end.



In Conclusion

After all, is said and done, this is also partly why people have “middle-age crises,” reflecting at the midpoint in their life and impulsively trying to “make-up” for lost time by indulging in their basest desires.

Just like with old age, the cure here is simple - reflection must come often, and it must come with a dash of hope.

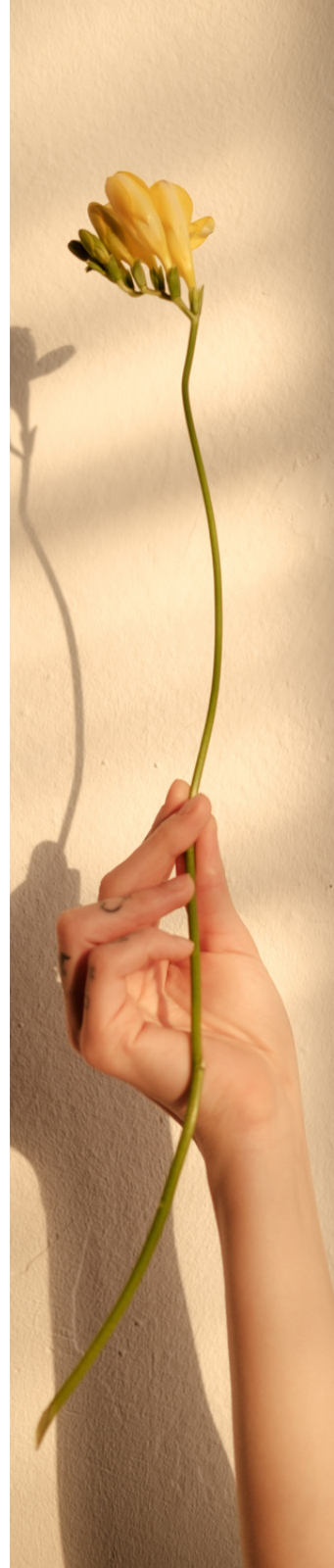
Yes, this all might sound scary, especially to younger or old, but not that old readers, but it shouldn't worry anyone at all.

We might become paralyzed with the paranoia of not choosing the correct partner, the correct career, or the place to live.

And while it is important to take the time to make sure our decisions are thought out and not impulsive ones we'd come to regret later, we shouldn't freeze in fear.

People choose wrong all the time, and unfortunately, no amount of planning will eliminate that.

But here's the upside, choosing wrong is often much better than choosing nothing at all.



Plenty of success stories feature people choosing the wrong field, for example, and then later switching over to something almost entirely unrelated, say from math to psychology.

But as long as we learn from our mistakes and evaluate what worked or didn't and more exactly why it affected us this way, then those weren't mistakes at all.

Instead, every step in the path forward, whether resulting in what we thought it would or otherwise, becomes a valuable lesson.

Old age will come for us all, but old age doesn't affect us all equally.

Besides purely biological age, we also have functional age, which in medicine and psychology is used much more often.

Functional age is an indicator of our abilities in relation to how many years we've spent on earth.

Examples of possible mismatches are sedentary young men and women who can't even do a push-up and 60-year-old bodybuilders training every day with the intensity of a teenager.

All of this just goes to show that, as cliché as it sounds, the biggest predictable factor in how old a person feels is... hope.

We aren't talking about optimism and pessimism here.

Both can be foolish in the wrong situation, and rose-tinted glasses especially can seriously prevent us from making the right decision when things are going south.





But hope, and more specifically, hope combined with a purpose, can give us the strength, willingness, and resources to live a life worth living.

In fact, in spite of common beliefs, thinking about our life's purpose and long-term end-of-life goals doesn't depress us or remind us of our own mortality.

On the contrary, it can fill us with purpose and prevent stress, sadness, or regret in people as young as teenagers.

Hi!

I hope that you enjoyed and take advantage of this resource! I ask that you please do consider my fitness behaviour change program.

Think of it like a specialized type of health coaching. This is a great way to help individuals gradually change habits in a sustainable way.

I would welcome a chat with you.

Please use this Calendly Link:

<https://tidycal.com/sjgfitness/30-minute-meeting>

Compliments of:



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