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How to Age Gracefully by Changing Your Mindset



Do you greet each birthday with ambivalence or with anticipation? If you mourn the passing of time, here are some expert tips for how to reframe the aging process and start embracing it as an exciting season of life.

Aging is inevitable.

If you cringed when reading that, you're in the right place. And trust us, we get it. We live in an anti-aging society, after all — where actress Sarah Jessica Parker has to ask fans to stop calling her "brave" for letting her hair go gray and where we're bombarded with ads for "anti-aging" lotions and potions promising to turn back the clock against (gasp!) the horrors of laugh lines.

But here's some fascinating research that supports why you should approach aging with a glass-half-full mindset: *The Journals of Gerontology* reported that negative attitudes toward aging cause people to react more negatively toward daily stressors, and these individuals are 50 percent more likely to experience a stressful experience, such as hospitalization. Meanwhile, having positive views toward aging is also associated with "higher levels of life satisfaction, better self-rated health, improved social networks, and better well-being."

Another study, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, found that people who had more positive self-perceptions about aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer than those who had negative beliefs about it.

"When you start feeling like you can't do anything about aging and getting older, that's when you're getting old," says Dick Hartman, a motivational speaker, coach, and author of *Ease Into Aging: The Guide*, with whom DailyOM spoke for this story. "I live on the adage, 'If it is to be, it's up to me.' So if something happens to me, I have a lot of control over, one, what happens next and, two, how I deal with it mentally."

There's a reason why these years are called your "golden years" — it's a time to treasure! Read on for some tips to change your mindset and embrace aging as an empowering, invigorating, and exciting season of life.

1. Control What You Can

"If someone is dreading aging, the most important thing they can do is take the best care of their health," Michael Horn, MD, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in Chicago, tells DailyOM. "Once you know you are doing all that you can to live a long and productive life, obsessing over aging or mortality is counterproductive. The only alternative to aging, unfortunately, is dying prematurely."

Shift your mindset to acknowledge that while some things might be out of your control (like genetics), there are other things that are in your control. Get regular checkups. Speak with a doctor if you find yourself very stressed or struggling with a mental health concern. Make time for self-care activities, like joyful movement and eating in a way that makes you feel your best.

2. Let Go of the Linear

"When we view health in a linear and fixed way — like when we link it to youth — we work against the flow of life instead of with it," Clare Hagan tells DailyOM. Hagan, a certified holistic health coach who primarily works with clients in midlife and beyond, says, "As a result, we miss out on opportunities for healthful, vibrant living in our 50s and onward."

She explains that most of us have been taught to view our lives as having a beginning and an end. Our youth is "good," so we need to hold onto it as long as we can before "declining" in our older years. But health is constantly shifting, depending on our approach.

"Growing old, from the perspective of a holistic health coach, means coming *into* health," she adds.

It's all about using your life experiences, tools for healthful living, and wisdom to make the journey into your golden years the most fulfilling of your life.

3. Find Your Purpose

One of the biggest pitfalls that can happen at any age, but especially as you grow older, is losing your sense of purpose. "If you don't have something that moves you, something that pushes you, that's when life can be a drag," Hartman tells DailyOM. "The most important thing you can do is find the thing that makes you move."

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One of Hartman's favorite "aging gracefully" strategies is to keep a "10 Things I Do Every Day" list on his desk — a hand-picked selection of nonnegotiables that help him be at his mental and physical best each day. He aims to accomplish all of them before going to sleep. Some things on his list include: tai chi for balance and flexibility, plank pose for strength, reading the Bible, using an inversion table to stretch and lengthen his body, a 20-minute nap, a face and neck massage, drinking 96 ounces of water throughout the day, and calling a friend he wants to connect with or whom he knows needs a pick-me-up.

"[A list] keeps you focused and gives you some direction as far as having new things to do and staying on task," he says.

Your list will evolve with age, but try to commit to each list for at least a month to stay consistent and disciplined, suggests Hartman.

4. Stay Inspired

In tandem with finding your purpose, it's important to stay inspired each day, says Hartman. "If you read something good every day for 10 minutes, it adds up like crazy and can change your whole outlook on life," he tells DailyOM. Whether

it's a book, a podcast, or a devotional, incorporate inspirational reading or listening into your daily practice.

Dr. Horn likewise suggests having role models who emulate aging gracefully, particularly for anyone struggling to see aging in a positive way. For example, former President Jimmy Carter was building houses with Habitat for Humanity at the age of 95. Laura Ingalls Wilder was 65 when her first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, was published, kicking off an immensely successful writing career later in life. And Fauja Singh became the world's oldest marathon runner at the age of 100 after completing his very first marathon at the age of 89.

5. Connect With Nature

There are countless benefits to spending time outdoors, but when it comes to aging, the stress relief alone can be incredibly beneficial.

"Just 30 minutes of breathing in the phytoncides [or essential oils] of pine trees is enough to significantly reduce stress-related cortisol levels," Hagan says. "This calming effect is a precondition for physical healing as our bodies have the capacity to heal themselves when at rest."

She also considers nature to be a powerful tool when embracing a life change. "When we connect with nature in mindful ways, our unhealthy and unrealistic attachment to permanence is transformed," says Hagan. So the next time anxiety over aging is trying to creep in, take a hike or just find some green or blue space (environments with still or running water).

Green and blue spaces "promoted feelings of renewal, restoration, and spiritual connectedness" for the low-income seniors who participated in the study from the University of Minnesota. And you don't have to leave your city to find this feeling of zen. It's been proven that any connection to nature — whether it be in an urban park or tending a small garden on your patio — has profound benefits for older populations, including reduced anxiety and improved cognitive

function (the part of the brain that receives, processes, and stores information to help you carry out tasks).

6. Live in the Now

With age and wisdom come a whole lot of memories. And with that, some reflections on the ups and downs over the course of a life — times of loss, relationship struggles, health challenges, or financial hardships. One of the best things you can do as you age is to stay as present as possible, suggests Hartman. This will not only help you fully live your life, but also give you some substantial mental health benefits. Research shows that mindfulness, or staying in the present moment, can reduce depression due to its ability to enhance relationships.

"Living in the past can be dangerous and will hold you back big-time," Hartman tells DailyOM. "Do what you have to and deal with it or accept it. Don't flush it and don't deny it, but find a way to move on." While it might not be possible to wipe your memory clean of past hardships or painful experiences, mindfulness can help you detach your past from your present (and future), as well as help you find acceptance and forgiveness.

7. Give Back

One of the quickest ways to get over the dread of aging? Move your focus outside of your own orbit.

Hartman's wife volunteered at a nursing home to visit an elderly resident with no family each day for almost five years. The experience completely transformed *both* of their lives. A study published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* affirms how volunteering is beneficial for your health by giving your life purpose and meaning.

8. Nurture Relationships

If you're in a relationship, "treat your [partner] like they're the most fantastic person on the planet," Hartman urges. Even though you're no longer in the "young love" phase of your relationship, that's no reason for the romance to wane.

In fact, according to a recent national poll on healthy aging conducted by the University of Michigan, 76 percent of the participants, who ranged from 65 to 80 years old, believed sex was important at any age. So instead of buying into the myth that intimacy declines with age, consider all the positives that could help your relationship flourish in your golden years: more privacy, more time, less stress, and more opportunities for romantic getaways. And if you're not currently dating but want to be, there's no reason to let age stop you from getting what you want.

Don't neglect your platonic friendships either. A study published in *Psychology and Aging* that followed participants over the course of 30 years found that those who had developed quality friendships in their 20s and 30s, and continued to cultivate them as they aged, had fewer cases of depression and anxiety, and better overall psychological well-being, once in their 50s.

Hartman suggests trying activities that your friends enjoy (ballroom dance class, anyone?) to push yourself outside your comfort zone and ensure you're getting plenty of social time with them. It's good for your mind, heart, and soul.

9. Practice Gratitude

The research connecting gratitude with health benefits continues to grow, making it clear that being grateful — at any age — will only enhance your quality of life. The experts suggest finding the silver linings as often as possible. Believe that things happen for a reason. Yes, even that flat tire.

And remind yourself how grateful you are for *you*, Hartman says. "That, to me, is one of the hardest things — people don't love themselves. But if you can truly

love yourself, you can love others so much more deeply and love those you should be loving."

Aging gratefully will carry over into aging gracefully. Guaranteed.

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