

## Notes on Aging

by Carol S. Wolman, MD

Many people in my psychiatric practice are concerned about aging. It may be because of a milestone birthday- 50, 60, 70. It may be because of an injury or new physical weakness, or because of memory loss.

Since I am older than most of my patients (83 in June 2024), I have already experienced much of what you are concerned about. I'm a pioneer in the unknown territory of aging, a guide to those embarking on this adventurous journey.

I've put together a set of observations that some may find helpful. Please email me with any questions, or additions to this list.

Here we go:

"Consider the alternative." This is a cliché, meant to console. For people suffering from depression, it may be encouraging. But in my experience, it is easier for people to talk about death, which is an a fantasy outside of life experience, than about aging, which is ongoing reality for all of us.

Congratulations, you've made it this far. You're a survivor. You must be doing something right. Celebrate your birthdays.

Attitude is everything. If you resent aging, it adds to wear and tear. If you become depressed, you can easily slide downhill.

Survival, of both acute and chronic illness, is heavily dependent on the will to live. What keeps you going? Loved ones, an activity, a sense of purpose, meaningful work, your faith? Hold on to it; it will see you through crises of all sorts. Your life matters.

If you get sick, don't assume that this is the end. You can recover from most infections and many cancers, with proper treatment.

Do what you need to do to stay healthy- get enough sleep, eat healthy, exercise as you can. If your ability to exercise is limited, try yoga, t'ai chi, or swimming. Simple walking is available to almost everyone.

Accept the disabilities and pain that go along with aging. Resenting them, ignoring them, becoming anxious or depressed about them only adds a layer of psychic pain. One cannot weather "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" for all these years without something

going wrong. Just as the warriors of old were proud of their battle scars, so be proud that you have won the battles that have come your way and lived to tell about them.

You are a survivor. As you age, friends and relatives will die around you. Perhaps you are lucky; more likely, you have taken good care of yourself, and the people close to you have also taken care of you. Cherish your own good sense and the love of those dear to you. Grieve for those who have died but embrace your own life.

When someone close to you dies, especially your life partner or a child, you are vulnerable for a while. Often, if one spouse dies, the other follows within a year. It's as if you are being called from the grave, and life is no longer worth living. You may need grief counseling. Memorial services are helpful by putting a closure on the loved one's life. Concentrate on your will to live, and the activities that make your life worthwhile.

Don't hesitate to talk about your health problems with other old people. With time, most of us have surgeries, hospitalizations, doctor visits and medications. It's normal to share these experiences with others who are going through similar ones. Younger people don't necessarily want to hear your stories- save them for your peers.

Experience leads to wisdom. You've been there, done that. You needn't fear complications; you've dealt with them before. You know your strengths and weaknesses. You are much more likely to put things in proper perspective, making wise choices. You understand and apply the serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Take each new difficulty as a challenge, a puzzle to be solved.

Are you going deaf? There are cheap hearing aids now.

Are you forgetful? Write things down, repeat things you want to remember to yourself several times, place objects in obvious places to remind yourself- e.g., your purse or backpack by the door. There are lots of workarounds.

Do you have aches and pains? Ibuprofen with food works miracles and won't hurt your stomach.

See an MD if something is seriously wrong but take responsibility for understanding the illness and doing whatever is necessary to overcome or manage it.

Live until you die. As we age, we have less time ahead of us. When we are young, the future stretches out endlessly. Now we know to value every day, finish unfinished projects, do the things we never got around to doing.

Computers appeared during our lifetimes. We were not weaned on them, given them to learn and amuse ourselves, as is true of younger people. Learn what you can, but don't agonize if you get stuck. Find a friendly tech person- e.g., a younger family member, to help.

Give up pride and vanity. If you need a cane, use it. Be yourself, warts and all. At this point in your life, you don't need to apologize for who you are.

It's normal to do a life review as you age. Looking back, you'll have remorse, regrets, pride, happiness and sadness, love and enmity. If you have unfinished business with someone, take care of it. If you need to make amends, do it. If you have unfinished projects, complete them as best you can. You probably have some regrets- most people do. Nobody is perfect; accept yourself, past and present.

Stay in touch with young people and children if you can. Enjoy your grandchildren- they help you stay youthful. Try to understand the difficult world they are facing. Tell them stories about your life. Don't talk about your medical problems unless they help you with them.

You are only as old as you feel. Your body is aging, slowly wearing out, but your mind and spirit are ageless. Keep your mind active and sharp. Stay current with current events. Play games that challenge you. Learn a new skill.

Stay in touch with friends and family. The internet makes it easy to find long-lost friends, and renew the tie. Old people can become isolated; your social network is important.

Allow yourself to depend on others when you need to. As we age, we have less energy. We may need help with getting places, shopping, cleaning. Don't be too proud or ashamed, ask for what you need from the people you are close to.

Don't worry about ageism. There are people who shun the elderly or look down on them. These are people who categorize by race, sex, age- they are not worth worrying about.

Enjoy life- it is a priceless gift.