

SUCCESSFUL AGING AND RETIREMENT

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

It is with a sigh of relief that I and many others observe that our society is coming to the end of the *Age of Retirement*. Why? Primarily, because the Baby Boomers are insisting that they live a vital, productive, meaningful life up until the very hour of their last breath. They aren't going to be "the living dead," treating retirement as a necessary, slow march toward death. Instead, this bulk of humanity born somewhere between 1946 and 1964 are planning to live a vital second half of life. Indeed, the word "retirement" may not be part of their vocabulary.

Forging the dream of atrophy (i.e. retirement illusions of sitting on the porch and watching the sunsets) is not appealing to the boomer generation; the group of rebels portrayed in Woodstock, sit-ins, 60ies peace marches, etc. This generation that is reaching traditional retirement age as we speak is designing their own image of growing older. It is interesting to note that the timing for their rebellion is coinciding with an unprecedented economic recession. Perhaps, a silver lining for retirement aged people is that now they won't be pressured to retire to green pastures. The realities of the economy will help explain the boomers' insistence on remaining active in the workforce (at least as part-timers, consultants, mentors, etc.). In other words, pressure to retire may let up.

Why retire? Perhaps, the best reason to retire is when you are so physically sick or disabled that you can no longer care for yourself. Otherwise, total retirement that involves little mental or physical activity pushes us quickly toward a sharp decline in overall functioning. The motto, "Use it or lose it," aptly describes what happens when many people retire.

It is interesting to note that many people who can fully afford to retire, are often the people who choose not to do so. They understand that "retirement" is not a natural human process and that later life can be filled with new opportunities and fulfillment by staying involved in work or other forms of life long learning.

We've all noticed that our society seems obsessed with the negative aspects of aging, not the positive ones. In fact, our expanding elderly population is portrayed as a "ball and chain" around the necks of our youthful, spry society! Of course, this obsession with youthfulness underlies the prejudice of "ageism" that exists. Don't forget, ageism is just as destructive and divorced from reality as racism or sexism or any other "ism" in society. Contrary to many popular aging myths, numerous gerontologists have proven that getting older is not synonymous with fragility, lack of productivity, illness, etc.

I highly recommend a book, Successful Aging by Dr's Rowe and Kahn, in which they dispel many of the myths about aging that have persisted past their truthfulness. The authors discuss these key myths (and I quote):

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| <i>Myth 1</i> | <i>To be old is to be sick.</i> |
| <i>Myth 2</i> | <i>You can't teach an old dog new tricks.</i> |
| <i>Myth 3</i> | <i>The horse is out of the barn.</i> |
| <i>Myth 4</i> | <i>The secret to successful aging is to choose your parents wisely.</i> |

Myth 5 The lights may be on, but the voltage is low.
Myth 6 The elderly don't pull their own weight.

While there are always a few grains of truth in most myths, myths rarely hold up to the changing times and new scientific discoveries and progress. We must all be willing to let go of these old learnings so we can embrace more realistic information about aging and be better prepared to cope effectively. There are great resources for helping us advance our understanding of aging. Michael Cox, author of the book, [Don't Retire: Late Life Strategies for Aging Boomers and other Lost Souls](#), suggests many ideas for making the most of this latter stage of life.

George Vaillant, author on aging, describes one of the most important learnings we can all benefit from. He reports in his research book, [Aging Well](#), that “individual lifestyle plays a greater role than genetics, wealth, race, or other factors in determining how happy people are in later life.” Similarly, in the most extensive study by the MacArthur Foundation on aging, Dr's Rowe and Kahn found that it is not the genes that you were born with that determines your health and vitality, but your way of living.

Clearly, these studies remind us that we DO have a lot of say and control over how we age. Lifestyle, which includes quality of interpersonal relationships, positive attitude, play and creativity, faith, life-long learning, etc. are all things that we can work on to improve our quality of aging.

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