Optimistic Aging
4 Ways to Stay Positive about Getting Older

By Christa Melnyk Hines

What if you stopped thinking your best days were behind you, and you started thinking hopefully about the years ahead of you? How could that change your life?

Could sending that “over the hill” card teasing your best friend about her advancing age land the both of you in an early grave?

It just might, according to a recent survey of New Zealanders, ages 40 and older. The survey suggests that how we express ourselves about aging can have an important influence on how well we embrace our golden years.

“When a colleague turns 60, sending a birthday card that jokes about her best years being behind her not only entrenches negative ideas about aging in her mind, but also allows them to take root in our own,” writes researcher Craig Fowler, Ph.D., of Massey University School of Communication.

The happier we are, the more resilient we’ll be to the stress and challenges that accompany aging. In a culture that is predominantly pessimistic about getting older, how can we approach our senior years with a rosier outlook?

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Here’s what the experts advise:

1. Laugh it off.
First of all, don’t let that old geezer card ruffle your feathers. There’s no need to make the sender feel bad over what’s meant to be a light-hearted gesture.

When we can’t take the joke, “we risk looking like a curmudgeon or a bad sport, which further reinforces the stereotype of the ‘grumpy old person,’" says researcher Jessica Gasiorek, Ph.D., University of Hawaii of Manoa, who collaborated with Fowler on the study.

Instead, respond to remarks about aging with positivity, warmth, and a sense of humor.

2. Express gratitude.
Jane East, 72, of Grand Prairie, Texas, has weathered plenty of physical and emotional hardships throughout her life, but she’s not one to dwell on the negative.

“Life sends things at you that are really hard. You don’t have a choice of going through them, but you do have a choice of how you go through them,” she says.

Over the years, the now-retired schoolteacher and grandmother of five has bounced back from breast cancer and two strokes. Seven years ago she lost her husband Bill, a Marine Corps veteran, to cancer. She says his death was one of the toughest experiences of her life, but she’s grateful for the time they had together.

During the couple’s 40-year marriage, Bill’s military career and his work as an explosives specialist in Kuwait often put him in the crosshairs of danger.

“Before he died, we talked about what a wonderful life we’ve had and how fortunate we were to have him with us all of this time,” she says. “That’s what I try to focus on when I get sad thinking about Bill. We have to be thankful for the good things.”

3. Plug in.
According to a study conducted by researchers at Michigan State University, logging onto online communication platforms like Skype, social media, and email is linked to lower incidences of depression and loneliness among older adults.

Use online social networks, such as Facebook, to maintain relationships with friends and family and to share photos and stories. If you’re struggling with the latest technology platforms, ask for help from family members or friends who are active online.

4. Live with purpose.
“Living the best life you can is one way to manage fear and anxiety about aging,” says Jennifer L. FitzPatrick, M.S.W., author of Cruising Through Caregiving: Reducing the Stress of Caring for Your Loved One.

At the end of your life, when you look back, do you think you will feel good about how you spent your time? If not, now is the time to make changes to ensure that you feel satisfied with the choices you’re making in your life.

“Each night I ask myself, What did I do today that made the world a little better for someone?” East says. “It’s often something small like thanking the mailman or smiling at someone who looks sad. By doing so, I’ve made a difference.”


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