

## Coping With Old Age



A few years ago I attended the fiftieth anniversary of my high school graduating class in Pasco, Washington. As we gathered for the opening ceremonies, I looked around and said to my wife, "What are we doing here with all these old people?" My wife looked surprised and responded, "It's your class, they are the same age as you are." "True, but I don't feel as old as these people look." With a twinkle in her eye, my wife said, "Maybe they think the same about you." I inquired from various old-time friends. It was true, they thought I looked old too.

**Old age creeps up on a person like a thief in the night.** Toward the end, just before it grabs you, there are certain tiny signs: hard breathing over little exercise, slight trembling of the hands, certain little twitches, flabby muscles, slight aches and pains, increased trips to the doctor, wrinkles, gray hair, slight impairment of short-term memory, generalized weakness, less latitude in eating and sleeping habits, decreased interest in sex, less adventuresome, and on and on. May I repeat, these symptoms and others like them gradually creep on us without our noticing that we are growing old.

Many people are sensitive about old age. They say, "A person is as old as he feels," or "I don't have birthdays anymore." They don't reveal their age, hoping the process will go away. Other people do not even admit that old age exists. And others spend a fortune trying to cover it up by camouflaging wrinkles, dying their hair, surgically lifting their face, and taking all kinds of potions to keep themselves looking youthful. We have all seen people that don't look their age--some who are 50 years old and look like they are 90, and others who are 90 and look like they are 50. Ahem! Some folks say I hold my age of 70 as if I were much younger--it makes me feel good to think that it might be true.

We have hardly recovered from the shock of realizing that we are getting old when we receive more bad news. The thing we thought would never happen--we are going to retire or be retired from the job we have held for 40 years or more. Like others, I have said, "I'm never going to retire." And then, chagrin of chagrins, I did. It is so difficult to retire that a small percentage of people appear to shrivel up and die shortly after retirement. Most people who successfully face old age and retirement claim that they do not retire; they only change what they do.

When I think of coping with old age a number of cliches come to mind: "Act your age," but I don't want to act old. In fact, it comes to me that I don't even want to admit that I am old. "Ignore old age" is my motto. Then some of the aches and pains of arthritis catch up to me and old age cannot be ignored. The "march of time" is inexorable--everyone who doesn't die young is doomed to get old and die, but there are certain things we can do to delay old age and make it more livable.

## TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR BODY

That ancient book of wisdom, the Bible, declares, "The body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit . . . which you have from God." We are expected to take good care of this extraordinary house that contains our Spirit, mind, and soul.

- **Keep yourself clean.** The old saying by Benjamin Franklin, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" gets truer as the years go by. When suffering, sickness, and mental deterioration come upon older people it is more difficult for them to keep clean. But, it is a necessity, even if we must hire someone to help. To be unkempt is the surest way to hasten the problems of old age.
- **Exercise regularly and moderately.** Older people often are sedentary and have problems with exercise and activity; but to stay alive exercise isn't a choice; it's a necessity. I can remember how pleased I was to get my electric wheelchair, only to discover that I quickly lost body strength when I stopped pushing myself around. Now my electric wheelchair is in a semiretired condition and I am getting better.

I remember Betty Johnson, a patient at the Riverside Convalescent Home. She was just 35 years old, but she got tired of life and refused to move. It only took her a year to wither and die without exercise. I used every argument I knew trying to get her to move her body. She had chosen this vindictive form of vengeance against her family--the slow suicide of not moving her body. A sedentary life-style can be a form of suicide. We must persuade ourselves and others to keep moving as old age approaches.

- **Eat a little less, but be sure the food is well balanced and nutritious.** Growing a garden is a neat idea. There is nothing better than fresh vegetables. It seems to me that some warning needs to be made about fad diets and peculiar eating habits. If a person has reached retirement age, probably they need to go slow in radically changing their mode of eating. The older we get, the less we eat for pleasure and the more we eat for survival. We eat, not so much to satisfy our appetites, but to satisfy our nutritional needs.

One 90 year-old lady said to me, "I don't feel like eating any more, so I won't." I said to her, "You can't fool God that way; your choice is slow miserable suicide, and you are just as guilty of taking your life as the person who chooses a gun." She was a wise and mature spiritual lady so she said, "I never thought of that before. You are right! I will start eating again." She did, and the next 5 years were quite beautiful.

- **Take a sensible approach to dieting.** Many people who reach retirement age are overweight. Now is the time to do something about it. The magic formula is simple: Eat a little less and exercise a little more. Don't go on a crash diet. Fast weight loss only means fast weight gain. Gradually cut down on fat, sugar, and the amount you eat and increase the amount of exercise. Gradual weight loss by changing your life-style of eating and exercising is the only way.

However, I knew a man by the name of W. A. Moore who lived to be 105, worked every day, and weighed over 300 pounds. Research tells us that when you get to be a certain age (probably over 70), weight no longer is a factor in longevity. But, don't count on it. If you are overweight, reduce it a little, if you can. Sometimes the worry over weight is more serious than the weight itself. So, try to reduce; but, don't kill yourself trying.

**I went on a diet,  
swore off drinking and heavy eating,  
and in fourteen days,  
I lost two weeks.  
-- Joe E. Lewis**

Unfortunately, many times weight loss is based on depression or some other serious condition. It is possible to be very slender because of a mental disorder known as anorexia nervosa or bulimia in which a person forces vomiting after each meal. Preoccupation with slenderness can often be more debilitating than plain ol' fat.

- **Eliminate bad habits.** It's never too late to stop smoking, boozing, or kicking any addictive condition. In my psychological practice I have treated people of every age who have quit "cold turkey" every addictive practice known, no matter how severe. I treated a 70 year-old man who had been addicted to alcohol all his life. He stopped short one day, by choice, and never drank again. He died at the age of 82. I treated another man, age 52, heavily addicted to heroin. He threw away the needle and with a prayer "God Help Me" never went back to his addiction. I have seen it happen in my prison work a thousand times. A true religious faith is stronger than any addiction. With the help of God and our faithful friends, the world of booze and narcotics can be conquered.

- **Fight back at sickness and disease.** In our day of Social Security and Medicare there is little excuse for older people to let health conditions slip up on them. With little expense, we senior citizens can get regular checkups; and if something is coming, we can take preventive steps. If you have a medical problem find out as much as you can about it. The government has free booklets on every health subject imaginable. The booklets are easy to read and contain the latest information on every item of health. Examine the health information source listings, pages 246 and 247 and write for a list of publications relating to the subject you would like information on. This way you can stay up on the latest information about good health.

The rules for good body health are so simple that they are taught early in grade-school years to children. However, those simple rules are often so neglected and so costly to health that the U.S. Department of Health estimates that 25% of our senior citizens die needlessly of simple neglect years before their time.

The body is a marvelous machine; but, like all machines, it will eventually wear out. However, we know that with a little care a machine may go for 100,000 miles or more before it gives up; but, with a little neglect the best of machines can be brought to an untimely end. **A major rule in coping with old age consists of taking care of our machine--our body.**

---

## MAINTAIN A GOOD MENTAL OUTLOOK

Obviously the mind and body can't be separated, so what you do for one, you do for the other. One of the saddest sights the world has ever known is Alzheimer's disease. Of course, we do not at present know the cause or the cure. How terrible it is when an older person loses his or her memory and the ability to think. Believe it or not, more people do it by default than do it by catching the disease.

We need to keep our minds vigorous and active up until the end of our body. Here are some things that help to preserve the mind until the end:

- **Do useful work for the fun of it and sometimes for pay.** Retirement really does mean changing occupations. Don't let yourself sit around and stare into space. Get occupied. Be careful for people who can and will take advantage of you; but, usually we have friends, family, or church that can advise and keep us from being hurt.

My wife does beautiful handwork that she will enter in the county fair. I write and have the pleasure of seeing some of it bring in a little income. My wife sews and I fool around with the computer--we both take classes at

the local community college. We are as busy and more happy than we ever were in occupational land.

- **Go places, if possible.** See the world. Travel to faraway places and gasp in amazement at the beauty, the glory, the majesty, and the wonder of life. Some people can't travel because of physical conditions. Then travel with brochures, magazines, TV programs, and your imagination. I knew a man who lay on his lawn and studied the myriads of tiny life forms with a pocket magnifying glass. He said, "I am astounded at the amount of travel a person can do in an area the size of a postage stamp."

Sometimes travel is limited because of bathroom conditions. My wife and I go everywhere and I still must urinate at least once an hour and I can't use most public toilets because they are not equipped for wheelchairs. Believe it or not, there are devices you can wear that work beautifully and equipment that you can carry inconspicuously everywhere you go. I find it impossible to get in and out of showers and bathtubs that are not specially equipped. We have discovered that a wonderfully refreshing bath can be taken in any sink with liquid baby soap and a sponge to rinse off. If you really want to travel, it can be done with comfort.

I know a man who is confined to his wheelchair. He took a year and all alone went around the world. Everyone he met, even primitive natives of Africa, were eager to help him. He tells a few wild stories, but he had the time of his life.

- **Write letters to relatives and friends.** An old song goes, "Make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold." Don't lose track of your relatives--call them, write to them, talk to them, share their joys and sorrows, and they will do the same for you. Never go to a gathering and say the people aren't friendly. What you really mean is that you didn't go out of your way to be friendly with them. Often people can pick up our coldness and they avoid us. I went to a church one time that was full of "God's frozen people." Instead of resolving that I would never go back to that church, I resolved to go back and break the "ice." I walked up to the frozen people, stuck out my hand, and said, "I am trying to be a warm and friendly Christian; will you help me?" They did, with laughter.
- **Maintain your hobbies and get some new ones.** Hobbies are fun things to do. If you don't have a hobby, arbitrarily choose one and stick with it long enough for it to grow on you. Or, if it is not for you, you can honestly reject it. Then, choose another hobby and stick with it long enough to gain some expertise. Keep choosing hobbies, until one becomes so fascinating you can go for broke. Hobbies do not necessarily cost a lot of money. Most reputable hobbies have clubs of interested people. Join the club, read their literature, and get involved in having fun.

- **Read good books.** If you can't read, go back to school and learn, or join Frank C. Laubach's program of "Each One Teach One," and get someone to be your tutor. If your eyes are too bad to read, then get some tape-recorded books and listen to them. If you can't hear or see, then get some help from the government, take some braille courses, and have the Reader's Digest send to you their books in braille. Radio and television have some interesting educational channels that on occasion can substitute for good reading.
- **Go to community and school activities.** Get yourself involved with the programs of your area. My wife and I live in Lake Shastina, a community of approximately 1200 people. Last night we journeyed to a nearby community (8 miles away) and listened to the 105-piece San Francisco Philharmonic Orchestra. We go to the monthly clubhouse programs, the grade-school festivals, the county fair, the high school ball games, etc. In fact, we are busier in this small community than we were when we lived in Los Angeles. Go to community functions and talk to people. When you get involved you won't be bored, and better than that, senility slows to a halt.
- **Play games and enjoy sports.** Learn how to play the parlor games that kept the families of yesteryear together. Checkers, chess, backgammon--there are a thousand games that are fun and will keep your mind alert. T.V. often will not. Every evening when the day's work is done, my wife and I get out one of the many games we have collected and have fun. It keeps us young.

Seldom can we afford to go to a big league or professional game. But, we can afford to go to the local high school and grade-school sports. When you get acquainted with some people, it becomes even more exciting, particularly if one of the participants is a grandchild.

- **Avoid negative daydreaming about the past.** The past is over and done with. Whenever you think about it, remember the pleasant and good times, but don't even dwell on them. Provide for yourself some new pleasant good times. Do not end your days with regrets on how you lived--good or bad. End your days like Moses, full of life, energy, and exciting happenings.
- **Go back to school and take some courses and find out what our kids are doing and learning.** We have a community college just 8 miles away from our area. How I love to go back to school and take courses I didn't have time for when I was a young man. On occasion it is a little embarrassing to sit in a class full of people younger than my grandchildren. Even my teachers are children to me, some barely out of college with a fresh B.A.; and me with my awesome Ph.D. Forget all that--I want to learn things and keep my mind alert; so, it's back to school for me.
- **Monitor your attitudes by keeping a daily journal.** There are certain mental attitudes that are destructive to the happy life of anyone and particularly to senior citizens.

- Avoid crankiness and bad temper. Record your slips. Give yourself a daily grade on temperament and strive to improve through daily monitoring.
- Avoid seeing only the negative side of things by counting your blessings, not your curses. It is so easy to become negative. Older people have lots of aches and pains and sometimes severe financial worries. We older people must fight hard to keep a positive attitude and maintain our faith.
- Check yourself against the fruits of the spirit. The good Book tells us to grow the fruits of the spirit, which are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." As a person begins to deteriorate physically and mentally, it is easy to let the spiritual life ebb away, by developing a strong self-righteous, complaining (ain't it awful) attitude. Check that the fruits of the spirit are growing.
- **Fill your mind with positive words** like:  
 YES, YES, I CAN; rather than no, I can't  
 FINE, WONDERFUL, SPLENDID; rather than terrible  
 HOW NICE, THANK YOU; rather than ugh, I don't like it  
 I'M GETTING BETTER; rather than I'm getting worse

## KEEP YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE INTACT

Sadly, I have seen too many devoutly religious people work hard for the good most of their lives and then as they approach the end of their journey give up, waste away, and lose their faith. Here are some suggestions:

- **Keep practicing your faith.** Not so long ago in a big city area a famous bishop of a great denomination approached old age, developed a severely painful case of arthritis, cursed a God that could visit such agony on one of his servants, publicly proclaimed he had given up his faith, became a snarling skeptic, and died a bitter old man. What a sad thing for a quarterback to give up just before the touchdown.
- **Get in touch with nature.** Spend some time each day outside in nature. If that is not possible, get some plants in your room and grow something. Get your fingers in the dirt, lift your head toward the sky, watch the stars, the clouds, the changing heavens, and then turn your eyes upon the beautiful growing things and exult in the glory of life.
- **Speak a good word, or do a good deed, or think a good thought about the positive nature of things.** The other day I was feeling a little tired after a long trip to Sacramento. I stopped in a gas station and a young man waited on me. When I paid the bill and started up my car to leave, the young man said, "God go with you on your journey. May you be safe and happy." Maybe he was a religious gook, I don't know. But, I do

know that he cheered me up and made me realize the value of a good word to a passing stranger.

- **Never give up your hopes for the future.** Death is only a step away for those who lose hope and eternal life is available to those who keep up their hope. The great master was crucified between two thieves: one who lost hope and scoffed and sneered; one who still thought life contained some answers and cried out for the master to remember him. When I approach the end of my days, even if I am suffering the tortures of the cross, I want to hear the Golden One say to me, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." How important it is not to give up hope.
- **Don't let yourself get bitter or mean.** On occasions when people get difficult, a friend will say, "I'm going to move to the middle of the Alaska tundra, a thousand miles from my nearest neighbor." My son John heard my friend make that statement and replied, "Then, you will be involved in a deeper problem, that of raw survival with the elements." A person can't get away from problems. "Life consists of solving problems, and the good life consists of solving them without becoming bitter."

If people are not tactful and hurt your feelings, show them how to be tactful. E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India, once said, "I never allow people to hurt my feelings or insult me. No matter what they say, I never take offense; because, the deeper my offense, the shallower my faith." Most of us might find that policy a bit too much, but it works.

I keep asking myself the question, "How does my bitterness help me to solve this problem?" The answer always is, "It doesn't. Bitterness only makes it more difficult."

- **Fight off death to the very end.** You believe in life, not death. Show by your eagerness, vitality, and enthusiastic living that you want to live forever. Fill yourself with love of life and keep yourself alive as long as you can and death will be for you a magnificent graduation ceremony.

Courtesy: [http://seniors-site.com/coping/old\\_age.html](http://seniors-site.com/coping/old_age.html)