

Your roadmap to positive aging

BY NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG, *Correspondent*

Former poet laureate Donald Hall's book "Essays After Eighty" is enough to depress anyone. He presents aging as a series of losses — one's driver's license, bodily functions, death of friends and wife, etc. These and other losses, he claimed, prevented him from continuing to write poetry. Is his the "right" template for thinking about old age?

I propose another way of approaching aging, called by many Positive Aging. I suggest that we all can become positive agers, that we can aspire to being upbeat, optimistic, happy while accepting the losses and dismissive way the old-old are often — not always — treated.

I believe it is possible to look at aging in a way that is realistic but not depressing. To do that, we need to pay attention to what I call your Psychological Portfolio. Just as we look at our financial portfolios to determine how to make choices so that we do not outlive our money, we need to rebalance and manage our Psychological Portfolios. Our psychological resources consist of a clear identity, a strong purpose and a nurturing of relationships. A word about each.

Clear identity: The definition of identity is the "set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognizable or known." For example, people describe someone as outgoing or introverted, happy or sad, adventuresome or cautious. Attitude is defined as "manner, disposition, feeling, position, etc.; tendency or orientation, especially of the mind." I lump these together because attitude is part of or a reflection of your identity. Your attitude clearly reflects how you will approach aging. Is your attitude positive, negative or benign? Do you agree with Donald Hall's pessimistic view? Or do you have an upbeat, curious attitude about the future?

A recently published article from the Harvard Medical School called Living to 100: What's the Secret? concludes that "if you bring to your life appreciation and respect, and embrace aging with good humor, grace, vigor, and flexibility, you will — at the very least — be happy to grow old." The subtitle of the report — "Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, mindfulness, and inner strength" — concludes that a sunny outlook might protect the heart and brain.

In order to understand successful aging, George E. Vaillant, psychiatrist and director of the Harvard study of adult development, studied three major groups over many decades: 268 Harvard men born in 1920; 456 disadvantaged inner-city men born about

1930; and 90 gifted women born about 1910. Based on this most comprehensive set of studies, Vaillant concludes that adults develop by "a widening radius over time," which is quite different from the contrasting view that aging is downhill. The most important finding is that there are opportunities for growth and joy at every age.

Strong purpose: I interviewed a woman who said she helped organizations develop business plans but did not have one herself. She needed a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning. Tara Parker-Pope, a New York Times columnist, wrote: "Forget the New Year's resolution. This year, try creating a personal mission statement instead."

The need for purpose is echoed over and over. For example, the CEO who felt that "retirement was hollow," or the mayor of a small city who said, "I no longer have power to get things done. My purpose has disappeared."

On the other hand, in a conversation with a woman about her retired husband, she said he had surprised her. He always has a project going, she said. Right after he retired, he volunteered to participate in a life-long learning academy. Within two years, he was president and working as hard as he had ever worked when he was really "working." He is constantly energized.

Many retirees have a clear purpose, but even more have no idea how to start on a new path. I found from my interviews on retirement that people follow one of six paths. A clue might be to



Nancy K. Schlossberg Photo by Rod Millington

ask yourself: Which path or paths appeals to you? What do you want to be?

1. Continuer: Doing more of the same, but in a modified way.
2. Adventurer: Engaging in something new.
3. Searcher: Looking for your niche.
4. Easy Glider: Going with the flow.
5. Involved Spectator: Caring and learning but no longer a key player.

6. Retreater: Stepping back and rethinking or, for some, giving up.

Nurturing relationships: Donald Hall is right when he claims that as we age our existing relationships are interrupted or changed through death, illness or growing apart. It is important for you to figure out how to replace, maintain and improve your social connections, sometimes referred to as “social capital.” Just as you check to see that your financial capital remains stable — and hopefully grows — you need to assess your social capital and take positive action if you’re not pleased with what you see.

Betty’s husband died the year she retired — double whammy. She is struggling to figure out ways to replace her work community. She now goes to the local gym five times a week and has started making new friends. She cannot replace her husband, but she makes sure she has social engagements several nights a week. She has started going to theater and concerts. She knows it is important to stay engaged.

And, in conclusion, we need to be intentional about ensuring that we will be part of the positive aging movement, that we will, if needed, force ourselves to strengthen our Psychological Portfolio. It all depends on our attitude and our commitment to stay positive, develop a new purpose and continue nurturing our relationships.

Will it be easy? Of course not, but it will be worth it.

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