

RELATIONSHIPS: TRANSITIONS



“Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative”

By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

Correspondent

Hard to believe but true: Presidents Kennedy, Eisenhower and Roosevelt “suffered illnesses that would have merited a 100 percent disability from the Veterans Administration,” according to George Vaillant, a psychiatrist, Harvard professor and author of many books about the longest longitudinal study of adults from college to old age. In his current book, “Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study,” he points out that “clearly, (attitude and) subjective health are as important to aging as objective physical health.” “Whether we live to a vigorous old age lies not so much in our stars or our genes as in ourselves.”

Not surprising are the findings that those with a disability who maintained positive beliefs were more likely to make a recovery, according to Yale epidemiology and psychology professor Becca Levy.

“We think the results are very promising and encouraging and show that mindset may be associated with recovery in elderly patients.” (This study appeared online in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Nov. 21.)

We can observe many examples suggesting that attitude and well-being are linked.

For example, an 87-year-old woman who has endured many tragedies, including the death of one of her four children from a brain tumor, the murder of a brother and the passing of her husband



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of 60 years, is starting a new chapter of her life. Her children showed her how to get online, where she met someone new and has turned her focus to the future.

An 80-year-old man who is legally blind took two subways and one train to visit his granddaughter in the hospital. I commented on his ability to do what would seem impossible for most of us. “I made up my mind NOT to be a tragic figure,” he said. “I made up my mind to function as independently as I possibly could.”

Another example: Canadian writer Alice Munro announced that it was time for her to retire from writing. She had lost her husband and now was ending a long successful career. She made a conscious decision to become more social by accepting more invitations.

“I do things quite purposefully now to get out on the surface of life,” she said in a recent article, *Putting Down Her Pen to Let the World In*, by Charles McGrath in *The New York Times*.

These survivors made up their minds to flourish. They do not know it, but they are part of the Positive Aging movement, which fosters resilience while focusing on one’s strengths and happiness. Hundreds of books, articles and conferences

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The Institute for the Ages will host a two-and-a-half day event in Sarasota from Feb. 9-11, 2014. The conference theme, *Positive Aging Transcends: The Voice of Innovation and Community*, will showcase the innovative efforts of entrepreneurs and business leaders, academic researchers and government policy makers who are engaging with communities for the social and economic benefits of positive aging. More information, registration and conference updates can be found at www.institutefortheages.org.

on the topic reflect the degree to which the movement has traction. 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 says it all: *Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, mindfulness, and inner strength*. The conclusion: “A sunny outlook might protect the heart and brain.” (Find the study at www.health.harvard.edu/downloads/Living_to_100.pdf)

A friend read a draft of this column and suggested that I was overlooking the

difficulty many have as they try to adopt a positive outlook on life. I agree with her. It is difficult, but not impossible. Here are a few tips about ways to develop a sunny attitude:

1. Give yourself a pat on the back for making the effort to adopt a positive attitude. Remember that you need to commit to doing it and take whatever steps are necessary — whether it is physical therapy, counseling, taking courses, etc. — to increase your needed skills. My own situation is a case in point. During the last year of my husband's life, he had care around the clock. As he was dying, I had emergency back surgery, followed by a hip replacement and two months in a rehab nursing facility. Despite what seemed to me to be overwhelming challenges, I made up my mind that I would walk again and committed to a rigorous course of physical therapy.

2. Challenge your thinking. Martin Seligman, one of the founders of the Positive Aging movement and a psychologist who studies the effect optimism has on well-being, suggests that you need to argue with yourself when negative thoughts creep in.

3. Compare yourself with others in even more challenging situations. When my sister-in-law was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, she kept telling me it could be worse. She compared herself with those who had to be fed with a feeding tube.

4. Be on the lookout for resources, such as books and conferences, about successful aging. The Institute for the Ages in Sarasota is hosting this year's conference on Positive Aging. These conferences provide opportunities to learn how to be more positive and build on your strengths.

5. Remember to repeat Johnny Mercer's advice: "You've got to accentuate the positive."

You've got to accentuate the positive

Eliminate the negative

Latch on to the affirmative

Don't mess with Mister In-Between

You've got to spread joy up to the maximum

Bring gloom down to the minimum

Have faith or pandemonium

Liable to walk upon the scene

To illustrate his last remark

Jonah in the whale, Noah in the ark

What did they do

Just when everything looked so dark

Man, they said we better, accentuate the positive

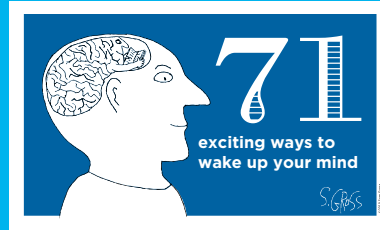
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Sarasota resident Nancy K. Schlossberg, a former professor of counseling psychology at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and is on the board of Institute for the Ages. She also runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through www.transitionthroughlife.com or at nancyks4@gmail.com.

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