

AGING REBELS DON'T GIVE UP: THEY REINVEST IN LIFE

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I taught my first course in adult development and aging when I was a beginning 35-year-old assistant professor at Wayne State University. It was about those wonderful people. I studied them, admired them but could not identify with them. Now as a 93-year-old professor emerita from the University of Maryland, I can identify with them. Now I know how it feels to be old. The wrinkles do not diminish the desire to love and be loved, to touch and be touched, to be socially engaged, and to help myself and others find meaning and purpose.

I am fortunate to live in Sarasota, the home of one of the Senior Friendship Centers led by Erin McLeod. where I have been co-leading a group of men and women in their seventies, eighties and nineties known as "Aging Rebels." They meet regularly to discuss issues that can press hard on us during the last third of life. They ask, and answer, questions like these: Am I living in the right place? [Can I deal with loneliness during the pandemic?](#) How do I build relationships with family, partners, friends, and colleagues? How do I cope with losses that accompany aging? [How can I build resiliency?](#) How do I find happiness? How do I garner the resources needed to keep going?

This is not a therapy group but it is therapeutic (Next Avenue, February 17, 2022).

SO, WHO ARE AGING REBELS?

They stand up against the stereotypes about aging. But most important they do not give up. For example, Samantha found ways to reinvent herself despite overwhelming losses that "kept piling up." After ending a toxic relationship with her husband, she fell in love but that ended when she became aware that her new partner was having multiple affairs. At the same time, one of Samantha's daughters was killed in an accident. Samantha wanted to die.

Over time, [with the support of a therapist](#), she began to get her life in order. In her 50s, she went back to school, became a licensed clinical social worker, and wrote a memoir. Slowly, her self-esteem returned. She eventually met and married a loving

man. At 84, despite a chronic illness, Samantha retired from her psychotherapy practice to make time in her life for her volunteer work and her [newfound passion for art printmaking](#). Recently, I followed up with Samantha, and here is what she told me. “My husband has become very ill and I have become a caregiver. It was overwhelming at first but here is my current take on life. I love being old. I’m proud. I’m wiser. I know how to get where I am going. I wear depends, deal with my own cancer and a husband now with dementia and upcoming heart surgery.” Samantha is an aging rebel who keeps reinvesting in life and unafraid to tell it like it is.

SO, HOW DO WE BECOME AGING REBELS?

Unfortunately, as we age, there will inevitably be breaks in our attachments—because of illness, death, moving, vulnerability, and misunderstandings. To handle these, we need resilience, the emotional flexibility to grieve losses, while opening ourselves to new relationships and experiences, and savoring the surprises life has in store for us. The Aging Rebels have done it but what about the rest of us. I suggest four ways to prepare to become an aging rebel.

Fight Ageism--Talk Back To Your Mirror

“Mirror Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Fairest of Them All?” asks the vain queen. That question plagues many as they look in the mirror and discover new lines.

What does this mean? It means that we have a love-hate relationship with aging. We want to live longer but don’t want to look as if we are living longer. This reflects our negative view of aging, our fear of aging, our resistance to reality. Age bias is alive and well. There are two aspects of age bias. The first is our own bias about aging—the messages we give ourselves, the assumptions we have about aging. The second is the messages we receive from society at large.

I will start with my own age bias. At a party, a convertible with the top down arrived. My first thought was how nice to be going to a party with younger people. I soon realized that the driver was a man who lives at the retirement community, Plymouth Harbor, with others in the car from the same place. I was startled. Is that the image I have of an 85-year-old man and if he is so “with it” why is he in Plymouth Harbor? My thought process reflected my bias about aging—that if you are in a retirement community you would not be in a convertible—especially in the back seat. I was doing what we do all the time-- categorize people by age. We

categorize teen-agers, middle agers, baby boomers and older people. But you and I know the reality—that there is more heterogeneity as people age, not less.

Birthday cards for those over fifty is the tip of the iceberg. We are bombarded with messages that older people have less—less energy, less opportunities, less sex, less money. Except for wrinkles it is all about less. Nancy Signorielli, Professor in the Communication Department at the University of Delaware, studied the under-representation of elderly characters on prime-time network. She concluded that “Television celebrates youth while it neglects and negates the elderly....”

These negative messages about aging have reached all of us – that is part of the reason we are frantically pursuing the fountain of youth. Millions of women and men go in for tucks and hair dying in an attempt to look younger. When will we honor the person who says, “You look great—your white hair sparkles?” Changing attitudes means we must confront our own biases and celebrate rather than negate our age and wrinkles.

In addition, we can all be agents for change. Listen to the Ted Talk “Elderhood Rising” by Dr. Bill Thomas a Harvard-trained physician who sings, speaks and acts about the joys of aging. Like Thomas we can all proselytize about the positives of living longer. (Ted Talk Elderhood Rising).

Navigate Transitions

One thing is certain—our lives will be filled with multiple transitions. Transitions are the theme that go from life to death.

Let me share Jeanne Betty’s story. Her daughter Wendy asked her 103-year-old mother, “Do you have another adventure in you?” and the response was a resounding yes. Wendy suggested that leave her retirement home with help around the clock to Mexico where she and her husband lived. Wendy wanted her mother nearby in a less institutional and expensive setting. And off they went despite the objections of Wendy’s siblings. I frankly was concerned—such a major disruption, such a major transition. We skeptics were so wrong. Recently sent pictures show Jeanne Betty in a small residential assisted living home one block away from Wendy holding hands with a gentleman from Germany who is living in the residence.

Jeff, a handsome 40-year-old man fell asleep at the wheel and as a result became a paraplegic. He was in rehab for over a year in Hawaii when the accident occurred.

His mother kept visiting him to give him the support both emotionally and financially. After Jeff recovered somewhat he wrote a beautiful letter to his mother ending with this, “I hope I can help you look at my future as I am trying to do with hope, courage, and curiosity.” Jeff lived another 20 years trying to make the most of his life. He joined AA, moved to be near his mother and showed the ability to garner his resources.

There are so many transitions—to name just a few more. Look at the reaction of Charlie’s adult children when we met someone new. They did everything they could to break it up; and the couple who moved into a new retirement community and Bill had a stroke upending their plans; and Stan whose wife had lung cancer I feel so helpless.” And Juanita who got her dream job was wondered why she was distressed with a happy transition. could I go on .

Some we plan, others just happen; some are positive, others negative. Transitions are events, like getting married, retiring, becoming a great grandparent, and returning to school and non-events, (like not being able to retire when planned, not having a hoped late life romance or not having children who care). These events and nonevents change your life: your role, your relationships, your routines or your assumptions.

The reason transitions are so dismaying—they change our life, our roles, routines, relationships and assumptions. So happy transitions can sometimes cause dismay because our routines are changed, our assumptions are changed.

What can we do when challenges overwhelm us? We need to bring all of our resources to bear—what I call the 4 S System. Your potential resources include your Situation, Self, Supports, and Strategies.

- **Situation:** This refers to the person’s situation at the time of transition. Are there other stresses? For example, if one retires and one’s significant other becomes critically ill, coping with retirement becomes difficult.
- **Self:** This refers to the person’s inner strength for coping with one’s situation. Is the person optimistic, resilient, and able to deal with ambiguity or not? Clearly what one brings of oneself influences how one copes.
- **Supports:** The support one receives or that is available at the time of transition is critical to one’s sense of well-being. If a new retiree, for example, moves to a new city knowing no one, with no supports, the adaptation might be slowed down.

But remember, today is not forever. You won't believe it when I tell you I was jilted many years ago. Tears, heartbreak, misery but today I can say it was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. To to understand your transition you need to evaluate how much it has changed your life and where you are in the process. Are you just thinking about retiring, actually retiring and looking back twenty years later.

Select Appropriate Coping Strategies

You have been coping all your life; you already have a repertoire of coping strategies that have helped you in the past. Sociologists Leonard Pearlin and Carmi Schooler interviewed 2,300 people between the ages of 18 and 65 living in the Chicago area to identify the major coping strategies people used as they faced life's strains and joys. They categorized them into three groups:

Those you employ to try to change the situation, such as negotiating, seeking advice, brainstorming, planning;

Those that change its meaning, such as developing rituals, relabeling or reframing, using humor, resilience, faith;

Those that help you relax, such as playing, physical activity, therapy, reading; or

Doing nothing.

Third, use those categories as your guide. For example, you can ask three questions when facing a challenge: Can I change the situation? Can I change the meaning of the situation? Can I relax? Should I do nothing?

I have personally tested this three-question approach. Many years ago, when I was in my 50s, I accepted a speaking engagement in Denver. I arrived at the hotel only to be told that I was not registered, and the organization I represented was not listed. I called the organization and found out that I had arrived a month early. You can only imagine the feelings I had. I called my husband who put things in perspective when he said, "Nancy, you cannot fall apart in Denver. Your new book *Overwhelmed* is about to be published and if you fall apart, it will be bad for book sales." That mobilized me.

I knew I had to calm down, so I went across the street to a wonderful restaurant. As I was eating a lovely meal, I asked myself, “Is there anything in my book that could help?” I remembered the three categories of coping strategies. I asked myself, “Can I change this situation?” The answer to that was clear. There was no way I could turn October into November. The second category held more promise. I could change the way I saw it. I began telling myself I was not a dowdy professor. I could visit Denver for lunch, maybe San Francisco for dinner and Paris for a long weekend. I could use this error as a way to become a world traveler. In addition, I had a great opening for when I returned in November, “You have never had a speaker more eager to speak to you.” And, finally, I could use the third category by going up and down the famous Denver walking/shopping street where I could walk aerobically in and out of stores. By the end of the lunch, I was a happy camper.

MAYBE CUT? Another example: The retired couple could not change the fact of his stroke so they had to reframe. They could not change the fact of the stroke but could look at it differently. Among many challenged with medical problems, some have looked to role models like Stephen Hawking, Christopher Reeves and Rom Das. They grieve for what they have lost but rejoice in what is left. The couple moving into a retirement community reframed the move as an opportunity to remain active and engaged with like-minded people. And everyone can benefit from using strategies like meditation, swimming, yoga and walking to reduce stress.

The take away: There is no single, magic-bullet coping strategy. You need to assess whether you want to and can change what is challenging you; if you can’t change it, reframe it; and no matter what, use relaxation strategies. In other words, the strategy you use depends on your particular situation. Creative coping means using strategies flexibly.

Adopt A Can-Do Positive Attitude

When Mikhail Baryshnikov, then age 62, danced at the 2010 Ringling Museum International Festival, he could no longer do the leaps from younger days. However, he came onto a plain stage with nothing but a screen. He started dancing to a video of a young man dancing. And the young man was Baryshnikov at a much earlier age. He danced to his younger self. You saw three dancers—the younger, the older and the shadow. He no longer leapt in the air but he still created a thrilling performance. He had style!

We all need a reason to get up in the morning, something that makes us feel we “matter” to others. Vicky, a recently retired entrepreneur, made up her mind to “repurpose” herself. She looked at her regrets and then decided to follow an earlier dream of being a writer. She now produces a weekly blog filled with interviews of people expressing their views on what counts as a successful life.

You can do what Baryshnikov and Vicky did—take stock of your strengths and limitations, slow down the pace if necessary, but not give up. As one Aging Rebel said, "We are adventurers in this life, with no assurance that each adventure will work out as planned. But we must be willing to take risks."

SO, WHAT’S THE TAKE AWAY?

If you

- Fight ageism—yours and others;
- Navigate Transitions;
- Select Appropriate Coping Strategies; and
- Adopt a Can-Do Attitude

You will feel relevant—that you matter. The late sociologist, Morris Rosenberg, coined the phrase "mattering" as one that describes a universal, and overlooked motive. He pointed out how critical it is to believe "that we count in other's lives, loom large in their thoughts, make a difference to them" (unpublished Ch. p. 1). Mattering to oneself, others, and the world is the coordinating, although not single, issue that guides our understanding of our selves --do I know who am I, do I appreciate myself, do I feel competent, is my inside and outside world congruent? do others appreciate me? do my work and community worlds make me feel needed? Rosenberg's concept of mattering is a universal, lifelong issue that connects us all. Rosenberg looked at adolescent boys and discovered that those who felt they mattered did not become delinquent. In a last throw away sentence to his article he pointed out that older people who no longer feel relevant can become depressed. Aging Rebels keep fighting to stay alive and make a difference.

Use the kaleidoscope as the metaphor for viewing your life. The possibilities are endless—with each new activity, with each turn of the kaleidoscope, you realize that in order to stay young at heart you need to continue loving, learning, working and playing to feel young at heart and wise with age.

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