

Introduction

Aging brings many challenges. Sometimes they can seem overwhelming. How do we feel as we confront these challenges? Do we experience love, envy, jealousy, or loneliness? Do we experience a fear of illness and death or a fear of outliving our money and being unable to live on our current income? Or are we excited about the future? Are we excited about finding new interests, new companions, and new surroundings, even as some of the old, comfortable ones fall into the past?

Too Young to Be Old tells a story about transitions and how to handle them, a story about aging and its possibilities, a story about living longer and living well. My mission in this book is to teach the principles of transition theory and positive aging through reporting on the research and sharing real-life experiences, mine and others', so that you can apply these principles to help navigate any major event—or nonevent—in your life.

POSITIVE AGING

Average life expectancy is continuing to trend upward. Nearly 80 million Americans are over the age of 55. Our country has more old people than ever, and they will, on average, be living longer than their forebears. For this ever-growing group, a key question is how to overcome the negative challenges of aging to get the most out of these extra, final years.

Like other phases of our lives, getting old presents us with transitions. Some transitions, such as the death of a spouse, may be forced on us. Others, such as moving from a house to an apartment or relocating to be closer to grandchildren, may be our choice. In this respect, aging is no different from any other phase of life.

It is all too easy to focus on the negatives of aging—illness, physical and mental disability, loss of loved ones—but because our definitions of aging have changed statistically and the average American now looks forward to more healthy years than his or her parents enjoyed, we are seeing an increasing shift in how people think about aging. From a deficit approach that focused on what we lost as we aged, we are shifting to a positive model that acknowledges that older people can make positive contributions to society, and that with aging—surprise!—comes happiness. I, and others who have spent much of our lives studying adult development, call this new model *positive aging*.

The aging process has emerged as a defining and challenging part of my personal life. I find it difficult to

think of myself as old-old, but demographically that is who I am. The combination of my personal and professional experience in concert with interviewing many individuals has led me to identify strategies that can boost your happiness and lead to positive aging, no matter what. This book describes these strategies in detail in each of the 11 chapters focusing on these topics:

- talking back to your mirror,
- saying no to ageism,
- embracing change,
- diversifying your coping skills,
- creating your retirement fantasy,
- choosing your place,
- coping with health challenges,
- understanding your family transitions,
- keeping your dance card full,
- going for romance and/or intimacy (if you want it),
and
- creating your own path to positive aging.

AGING AND HAPPINESS

Over and over again, we encounter individuals with stories that support the thesis that we can be old and happy at the same time. All around us are examples suggesting that attitude and well-being are linked. Consider the case of an 80-year-old man who is legally blind. He told me he took two subways and a train to travel from Washington, DC, to Baltimore to visit his granddaughter in the hospital. I commented on his ability to do

what would seem impossible for most of us. He said, "I made up my mind not to be a tragic figure; I made up my mind to function as independently as I possibly could."

Then there is the case of a 75-year-old woman who has endured many tragedies, including the death of one of her four children from a brain tumor, the death of her husband of 60 years, and the murder of her brother. She is starting a new chapter of her life. Her children helped her get online, where she met a new boyfriend. Now she is focusing on the future.

One of the most memorable anecdotes about positive aging involves a 90-year-old widow who happily displayed the ring she received to signify her engagement to a 95-year-old man. She calls him her fiancé, rather than her boyfriend or companion. They do not plan to marry, but they wanted a symbol of their commitment to each other.

It may seem counterintuitive, but a growing body of research suggests that as people age, they become happier. Various studies tell us that even if we are confronted with difficult challenges, aging does not have to be only a time of worry, fear, and loss. One recent study, reported in *Scientific American Mind*, suggested that we can all look forward to aging happier. This study of several thousand Americans born between 1885 and 1980 revealed "after controlling for variables such as health, wealth, gender, ethnicity, and education, that well-being increases over everyone's lifetime."¹ The exceptions might be people who lived through difficult

historical periods, like the Great Depression, or veterans who served in war. Life experience may make a difference in long-term happiness, but people's attitude also may differ depending on which day you ask the question. I often ask people if they are happier as they get older and, as one woman answered, "It depends on when you ask me."

Another researcher studied the paths of individuals from late adolescence to old age. George E. Vaillant, who directed the Harvard Study of Adult Development and wrote a book about it, concluded that successful, positive aging depends on attitude and outlook. For example, Vaillant observed that President Franklin D. Roosevelt "suffered illnesses that would have merited a 100% disability from the Veterans Administration. Clearly, [attitude and] subjective health are as important to aging as objective physical health." He wrote that "whether we live to a vigorous old age lies not so much in our stars or our genes as in ourselves."²

It may be tempting to dismiss this example because President Roosevelt was an exceptional person with significant resources. But there is plenty of other validation for this premise. Disabled persons who maintained positive beliefs are more likely to make a recovery, according to a study by Yale epidemiology and psychology professor Becca Levy.³

In fact, happiness is now a legitimate avenue for academic study. Martin Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement, suggested that we all have an emotional happiness baseline to which we

inevitably return. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*, one's happiness level is determined by three things: 50% of happiness comes from one's emotional baseline, 10% from one's life circumstances, and 40% from "intentional activity." This book is about the 40% we can control as we age.⁴

Along with documenting the happiness experienced by older persons, researchers are increasingly examining what it takes to live longer. A 2014 article by the Harvard Medical School, "Living to 100: What's the Secret?", concluded 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."⁵ The subtitle of a 2013 report by the Harvard Medical School says it all: *Positive Psychology: Harnessing the Power of Happiness, Mindfulness, and Inner Strength*. The report concluded that "a sunny outlook might protect the heart and brain."⁶

For older persons, as well as for younger ones, attitude can make all the difference between enhancing and enjoying your later years and focusing only on your problems. The people described earlier in this chapter—the newly-engaged 90-year-old woman and the blind 80-year-old who crisscrosses Washington, DC, and Maryland—are survivors who 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 on

the topic reflect the degree to which the movement has traction.

So how can we do it? We cannot control our lives to avoid the downs. What we can control is the way we deal with the ups and downs of life; in other words, the resilience with which we manage change, and the strategies we have in place to cope. And we can pay attention to the guidelines and strategies offered in this book, which will help promote positive aging.

ABOUT ME

I am an 87-year-old woman who endured several years as a widow-in-waiting. I have experienced retirement, the loss of my spouse, grief, recovery from grief and from my own physical problems, a return to dating in my 80s, finding a new love, and moving to a retirement community. I lived to tell the tale: As a retired professor of counseling psychology specializing in transitions, I am writing this book informed by my personal experience and by the knowledge and perspective afforded me by some 50 years of study and research, including hundreds of interviews, on the transitions of aging.

I bring two strains of experience to the task—professional and personal. First, I have been a student of adult development and aging since I was an assistant professor at Wayne State University and taught my first course in adult development at age 35. My subsequent career as a professor at the University of Maryland consisted of university teaching, conducting research, and

writing nine books about adult transitions. Over my long career I have had the opportunity to interview hundreds of individuals and hear their stories about their personal lives and transitions. Even since my official retirement from academia at age 67, my professional life has continued to be personally rewarding, with extensive opportunities for speaking and writing.

When I started teaching more than 50 years ago, aging was an abstract concept to me. Now, at 87, aging is no longer an abstraction. My own experience echoes that of the author Betty Friedan, who described her evolution while writing *The Fountain of Age*: “When I started this book,” Friedan said, “it was about them. Now it’s about me.”⁷ When I started studying and teaching about aging, it was about them. Now it is very much about me. So I bring my personal and professional lenses to the topic of how we can be positive agers.

In addition, I have experienced a new kind of transition—less observable, but as potent. For the first time, I felt the clock ticking and realized there are non-negotiable limits. Always before, if I did not reach a particular goal I could say to myself, “There is time to regroup and try it a different way.” Now I feel differently. The transition of thinking of myself as having limited options has been gradual. But at the same time, it is an exciting period. I am curious about the future. How will I deal with this final period of my life? I am determined to think positively, although that is not always easy. It is different. I say my age without trying to hide it.

After reading one of my published articles on aging, a woman I did not know called me up to say, “I wish you were my next-door neighbor so I could talk to you about my challenges and issues.” The purpose of this book is to communicate what I have learned as a retired professor of counseling psychology, as an author of nine books on transitions, and as someone who is actually living life as an old person. This book is for that woman who took the trouble to call me up, as well as for anyone else who is looking for guidance on how to successfully navigate the uncharted territory of getting old.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Too Young to Be Old is divided into four sections. Each of the 11 chapters recommends a broad strategy to help readers through the many transitions that typically occur during life’s later years.

Part I, *Resolve Your Love–Hate Relationship With Aging*, takes a frank look at the feelings that we experience as we age. It pinpoints our feeling that, even though we get the AARP membership offer, the wrinkles, the gray hair, and the Medicare card, we still feel young inside, and it suggests that some of our frustrations may emerge from our own ageism. Chapter 1, “Talk Back to Your Mirror,” suggests ways to overcome what is often the shock and dismay of how aging has changed us physically. Chapter 2, “Just Say No to Ageism,” confronts an issue that is often subtle and

unrecognized, yet one that plays an important role in our sense of self and our possibilities as we age.

Part II, Understand Transitions, provides the context for understanding the structure of any transition. Chapter 3, “Embrace Change,” outlines the model of transitions I developed after 35 years of studying transitions. I describe the role of timing in transitions—is the transition on time, off time, out of time, or no time/nonevent? Chapter 4, “Diversify Your Coping Skills,” explains basic coping strategies that can help you master the many transitions connected with aging.

Part III, Navigate the Many Transitions of Aging, shows how the transition framework plays out in four transitions commonly experienced as we age. Each of the four chapters dissects one of these challenges—retiring (Chapter 5, “Create Your Own Retirement Fantasy”), deciding where to live (Chapter 6, “Choose Your Place: Location, Location, Location”), coping with health issues (Chapter 7, “Cope With Health Challenges”), and coping with family issues (Chapter 8, “Understand Your Family Transitions”)—and suggests how you can ace those transitions.

Part IV, Create the New You, focuses on how you can approach the future positively. Chapter 9, “Keep Your Dance Card Full: Pay Attention to Friends, Family, and Fun,” underscores the importance of social engagement, and Chapter 10, “Go for Romance (If You Want It),” suggests that if you are still interested in romance, you should be open to it, regardless of your age. The final chapter, “Create Your Own Happiness:

Your Path to Positive Aging,” describes ways that you can create your own happiness as you explore and improvise your road to positive aging.

THE RESEARCH FOR THIS BOOK

I specifically targeted several groups and individuals to learn more about the transitions discussed throughout the book. I participated in what I called “conversation groups” around the topic of health, money, and caregiving. I met with people at a senior center, a YMCA, a community center in a low-income area, and a healing circle at a library in a low-income area. In addition, I conducted 25 interviews with selected individuals.

SUMMARY

Aging will continue to challenge us. Mastering these challenges is the goal of this book. Whether we are 60, 70, 80, 90, or even 100, we need all the signposts we can find to help us face the challenges ahead. This book is about the drama of our futures, which will be filled with unexpected twists and turns. We will be forced to improvise as we deal with the unknown. This is a book about how to learn, work, love, and play all through life.