

AGING GRACEFULLY

"Aging Gracefully May be Life Extending," ran a Reuters headline in July 2002, referring to results of a research study. But can the concepts of "aging" and "grace" really be combined? They can be indeed!

With age comes the benefits of wisdom and clear perspective. These gifts, if appreciated, can contribute much to family and community. Yet, aging "gracefully" is not always easy. Even while acknowledging that they have arrived at a stage in life when chronic disorders may multiply and health is more fragile, older adults must learn to discard the negative stereotypes of old age and relearn what it means to age in America. No one doubts that this may require deep resources of courage and patience.

However, many of America's mature citizens already have discovered strategies for graceful aging. Foremost is the old favorite: "positive thinking."

Researchers have noticed that individuals with strong spirituality tend to live longer as well as have healthier habits and better overall health. The particular study that inspired the Reuters headline quoted above was led by Dr. Becca R. Levy of Yale University. It focused on 660 adults ages 50 and older from an Ohio town. In 1975, participants were asked to respond to various statements such as, "As you get older, you are less useful" and "Things keep getting worse as I get older." Then, 23 years later, their attitudes (based on those same questions) were compared with their longevity. Dr. Levy and her team found that the adults who showed positive self-perceptions toward aging had a distinct survival advantage, living an average of 7.5 years longer than others. Their longer survival did not seem to depend on any other factor (age, sex, socioeconomic status, loneliness, or health).

This study seems to confirm the link between health and attitude, body and mind – a link that today has become accepted in many medical school curricula.

One of the most inspiring examples of positive mind/body self-healing is that of Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, who showed that taking charge and using humor as medicine could actually conquer disease. He was way ahead of the medical schools, which were at a loss in finding the connection between the body and mind in the healing process. But in 1964, he was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a highly painful, crippling condition that causes disintegration of spinal connective tissue. He wrote in his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, that he became aware that hospital life was depressing him.

So he checked himself out, moved into a hotel where the food was decent and watched funny movies. He hired a nurse who read him humorous stories. He discovered that laughter has the power to conquer pain; 15 minutes of laughter could guarantee him 2 hours of pain-free sleep. He also followed a regimen of high-dose vitamin C. Finally to the amazement of his doctors, Cousins reversed a supposedly irreversible disease. "I have learned," he wrote, "never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate – even when the prospects seem most wretched."

Despite the changes that growing older entails, staying as active and involved as possible are key to staying positive and maintaining your health. The end result is a rewarding life in harmony with others, in short, aging gracefully.

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