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## Age is a Matter of Perception

*"Studies have shown that an ant can carry one hundred times its own weight, but there is no known limit to the lifting power of the average tiny eighty-year-old Spanish peasant grandmother."  
Terry Pratchett, Reaper Man*

The odds are we are going to be around a lot longer than prior generations. The life expectancy for women is now 81, while men will reach an average age of 76. Keep in mind those are averages. At least half of us will live longer, some quite a bit longer. Now the trick is to make those years productive and enjoyable, and it turns out there is a relatively simple way to do so. Get rid of your negative stereotypes on aging!

The problem with getting old is that we expect to get...well, old. And old has some definite image problems. Old is too often characterized as the crabby curmudgeon, the physical wrecks, Alzheimer sufferers, and has-beens. Accept the negative stereotypes, and you may find that they can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

How we think about getting older affects how we age. If we expect aging to bring physical decline and reduced thinking abilities, the odds are it will. Sometimes the problem is that we attribute to getting older symptoms that have a very different cause and fail to seek medical attention. Even the medical profession has a tendency to see problems in terms of age. A retired friend was diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's due to her inability to remember details and think clearly. A year later, the diagnosis changed to sleep apnea. It turned out she was suffering sufficient oxygen and sleep deprivation that it was affecting her ability to remember and think clearly.

Approach aging with a positive outlook and you will be less prone to mental decline, less likely to develop coronary disease and more likely to lead a happier life. In fact, the Yale School of Public Health found that subliminally exposing older individuals to positive messages about aging resulted in long-term improvements in their self image, strength and balance. In a study on older adults, those who exercised functioned physiologically similar to younger people.

Even the feared onset of mental deterioration is greatly exaggerated and often encouraged by low expectations.

Five simple rules to making a longer life more worthwhile include:



1. Keep active
2. Stay social
3. Challenge yourself
4. Think positive
5. Don't write off problems to "old age"

Getting old and staying a vibrant, contributing part of society is actually a long tradition, contrary to any stereotypes of aging.

Benjamin Franklin was 77 when he served with the U.S. commission to complete negotiations and sign a peace treaty with England; invented bifocals at 78; at 81, served as the oldest delegate to the Constitutional Convention and became president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Florence Nightingale contracted Crimean Fever visiting hospitals during the Crimean War when she was 35 and was periodically chronically ill for years afterwards. But she went on to consult with the British army on improvements to the military hospital system, founded nursing programs, wrote, advised and mentored into her 80s. She was appointed a Lady of Grace of the Order of St John at 84; became the first woman to be awarded the Order of Merit in 1907 at age 87, was given the Honorary Freedom of the City of London at 88 and at age 90 was presented with the badge of honor of the Norwegian Red Cross Society.

In more recent times:

Dorothy Davenhill Hirsch of 89 years and 109 days visited the North Pole while aboard the Russian Nuclear Ice Breaker Yamal.

Simon Murray, 63 years 309 days old trekked the 1,200 km journey from the Hercules Inlet on the Zumberge Coast, Antarctica to the South Pole; a journey that took him 2 months to complete. Murray became the oldest man to reach the South Pole unsupported.

Smoky Dawson was an Australian country music performer who at the age 92 years and 156 days released a collection of original songs in an album entitled "Homestead of My Dreams" making him the oldest person to release a new album.

Dr. Leila Denmark was an American pediatrician who earned the title of "oldest practicing pediatrician" until her retirement on May 2001 at the age of 103.

Gladys Burrill at 92 years old became the Guinness Book of World Records' Oldest Female Marathon Finisher.

Tamae Watanabe became the then oldest woman to climb Mount Everest at age 63. Ten years later, in May 2012, she broke her own record, when she, now at the age of 73, again scaled Mount Everest.

The oldest person to be awarded a doctorate is Emeritus Professor Dr Heinz Wenderoth (Germany), who was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz University of Hannover on 29 September 2008 at the age of 97. The subject of his dissertation was "Cell Biological Studies in the Morphology and Physiology of primitive marine Placozoons Trichoplax Adhaerens".

At 80 years Jessica Tandy became the oldest actress to receive the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in Driving Miss Daisy (1989), for which she also won a BAFTA and a Golden Globe.

When he was 70 years old, Edmond Hoyle was the first to write down and copyright the details of the rules of many card games, chess, backgammon, and other games of his time period. His name appears on hundreds of books.

Laura Ingalls Wilder was 65 years old when she started writing the Little House on the Prairie series.

At 70 years old, Golda Meir became the 4th prime minister of Israel while Ronald Reagan became President 16 days before his 70th birthday.

We have the ability and tools to live longer, healthier lives than ever. Add a positive attitude and getting older becomes a lot more fun and a lot more productive.



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