

Healing Your Grief About Getting Older

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“Wish not so much to live long, but to live well.” — Benjamin Franklin

A simple truth is that from the day we enter into this world, we start to age. To be human means to grow older each day we are on this earth. We begin and we end. However, we have infinite choices about what comes in between. Our bodies often remind us we are changing long before our minds do (at least that has been the case for me!). Our bodies declare the realities of aging and introduce us to a heightened awareness of our mortality. Even as our bodies speak to us, our contemporary culture’s youth obsession *screams*. We worship the idea of perpetual youth, so we struggle against the passage into becoming a “senior citizen.” The huge anti-aging trend reinforces the idea that growing old is to be avoided at all costs—and cost it does!

At our fingertips, we now have Botox shots that paralyze our face muscles so we look more youthful and Restylane injections that fill sags and reduce wrinkles. We have hair-coloring, face-lifting, and teeth-whitening. We have garments that put body parts back where they used to be. We are surrounded by advertising that has us believing we can be “younger next year” or “regain our youth” or, even better, “live to be 150.”

The result is that ageism is alive and well in North America. Ageism is the term used to describe a societal pattern of widely held devaluative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes based on chronological age. If you’re supposed to avoid wrinkles, gray hair, baldness, or anything that suggests you are getting older, how can you embrace the present and grow old gracefully? In a sense, ageism is an attempt to distance oneself from the realities of aging, illness, death, and grief.

Yes, in our culture we tend to avoid the realities of aging, which ultimately leads to the greatest that-which-shall-not-be-named: death. But as long as we internalize and try to live out society’s attempt to go around aging instead of through it, we give up our precious opportunity to have grace and strength in the face of what aging brings into our lives.

I believe that our need to control is what underlies this tendency to “fight” the normal aging process. After all, you don’t have to grieve and mourn if you can stay “in control.” Most North Americans don’t like losing control.

To grieve and mourn the losses of aging

Yet even though we struggle for control for as long as we possibly can, aging inexorably brings us loss and grief. We cannot overcome aging and death. As our bodies change, we lose function and, society tells us, beauty. We lose our careers and sometimes our houses, our lifestyles, our finances. Our children grow up and move away. And one by one, our friends and family members begin to take their leave from us here on earth.

Especially in the beginning, the losses of aging can be ambiguous. Many occur over a long duration of time (up to 20 to 30 years or more), go socially unrecognized, and are surrounded by uncertainty. For example, you may have begun to experience short-term memory problems years ago. While these lapses did not radically compromise your ability to function, they may have more subtly affected your ability to communicate with loved ones, participate in social activities, and share intimacy. Relationships and roles, future dreams, and certainly your sense of normalcy may have slowly deteriorated. Or there may have come a time when you could no longer play basketball, run, and do vigorous activities.

You may feel, “I just can’t do so many of the things that I used to be able to do” or “My mind can no longer work like it used to.” You might feel like you’re not the same person anymore. You may feel like you are still twenty, but your mind may write checks your body cannot cash anymore. What was once normal is now changed.

And so we can’t help but grieve. **Grief** is the constellation of *internal thoughts and feelings* we have when we lose something or someone we love or deeply value. Grief is the anxiety, bewilderment, anger, sadness and other

emotions we feel on the inside. We are here to tell you that grief in aging is normal and necessary—so necessary, in fact, that it is only by embracing it that you can go on to live the life you yearn for. **Mourning** is this embrace. It is the acknowledgment and *outward expression of your grief*. We all grieve as we age, but if we are to live a continued life of confidence, meaning, and grace, we must also mourn.

It is up to you to actively engage in the mourning that aging invites into your life. It is up to you to trust that authentic mourning is how you integrate losses and move through them to what comes next. Then and only then do you have the space for the wisdom that aging urges you to discover and share.

Yes, aging can liberate you from your previous roles and offer you the chance to be authentic, genuine, congruent, and honest. Old age gives you the opportunity to be more of who you've always been.

Growing older invites an awareness of your inherent value while recognizing you are so much more than the sum of your accomplishments or your work product. Growing older invites you to remember the gifts you have to offer your family, friends, and the world around you. As your life moves from the “Surf at Waikiki” to “On Golden Pond,” you have the freedom to befriend your aging, experiment with the 100 ways outlined in this resource, or do nothing at all. While aging is inevitable, *how* you will age is often largely up to you.

Aging invites you to have *discernment*. When you are “discerning,” you are using your hard-earned powers of understanding—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual powers—to distinguish what is good for you and what is not; what is helpful versus unhelpful; what is necessary instead of unnecessary. Growing older gives us time to find the natural rhythms that best suit us. Our hope is that this book will help you discern how to re-imagine your final decades not as a time of dismal, depressing decline, but as one of opportunity and fulfillment, one to truly enjoy and even cherish. I invite you on this journey to befriend aging to the fullest!

Consider the simple yet profound, words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who reminds all of us:

*Age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with
Stars invisible by day.*

What a gift. I hope this little poem will help you shift your focus away from the mere physical manifestations of aging and toward what cannot be taken away: the love we give and receive from those who have brought meaning and purpose to our lives; the wisdom we have gained as we have grown older; and the capacity to pull back and reflect as we renew our meaning and purpose in each day we have left on this earth.