



10 Rules and 20 Resources for Smarter Aging

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01

Understand that “aging” isn’t a disease that suddenly strikes at 50.

People are always talking about how so and so is suddenly “aging,” meaning, typically, “looking haggard.” Sometimes aging does happen suddenly—through a stroke, or other extreme personal hardship. But more often, aging sneaks up on us little by little, when we’re not looking.



Photo credit: Andrew Seaman

Every day we live and breathe, the inevitable, microscopic costs of cell division (including deposits of toxic chemicals and nicks in critical structures) take their toll. When these tiny costs of living start to become noticeable to the naked eye—in our mid-thirties, say—we start to fret about “aging.” But we’ve been aging all along. It’s the nature of life. If we can keep this fact in mind as the years pass, we have a chance of living more fruitfully, and will be far better prepared for the telltale signs of older age, if we’re fortunate enough to reach it.



Resources:

- ▶ [This fact sheet by the World Health Organization](#) is a great place to start to understand what aging is, how it differs from person to person, and how to stay healthy as we age.

02

Screen all aging-related advice and products.

The twilight of the Boomers has unleashed a torrent of information about aging. My first rule of thumb for sorting the wheat from the chaff comes from one of my favorite geriatricians, Dr. Bill Thomas.



Photo credit: Josh Edgoose

- ▶ **Denialist** messages about aging bear the tone of hurricane warnings. “Run! Faster! We can beat this!” You know the voice. You hear it all the time. It’s the dominant tone about aging right now, worldwide.
- ▶ **Realist** messages are more controlled panic. “OK, aging, it stinks, do Sudoku, eat your fiber, exercise, meditate.” All good advice. The problem is the fatalistic “gird your loins” tone.
- ▶ **Enthusiast** messages are rare, but growing in volume, and sound like joyous laughter with an undertone of “Ommm.” I can hear you thinking: “Really? Enthusiasm about aging? Aging kills you. And makes you sick and ugly in the process.” In fact, the effects of aging vary considerably from person to person. But for no one is aging a picnic.

So where does enthusiasm come in?

- ▶ First, in a hard-won but whole-hearted acceptance of the realities of life, of which death is a part that nobody escapes. Hence the Ommm sound.
- ▶ Second, in the enjoyment of all of the real but often hidden or unrealized benefits of aging (see #6 below).
- ▶ Third, in the gift of wonder at the miracle of this human existence. Hence the joyous laughter.

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Enthusiasm about aging is rare because aging is hard in many ways, and because nearly everything in the culture mitigates against even accepting aging, let alone embracing it. But enthusiasm is the future. So accept nothing in the aging sphere at face value. Filter everything.



Resources:

- ▶ Dr. Bill Thomas, [*Second Wind: Navigating the Passage to a Slower, Deeper, and More Connected Life.*](#)

03

Fight ageism.

Ageism is discrimination and stereotyping based on age. Older people are ageist when they complain about younger people as if they were a coherent bloc. Far more often, older people are ageist against themselves, because they've internalized the culture's dismissal of them. We're swimming in negative stereotypes about older people, the last socially acceptable "ism": every single day we're subjected to "jokes" about old people's warts, whiskers, humps, spots, snail's pace, smells, forgetfulness, inability to learn, out-of-it-ness, dementia, their expensive dependency on the young.



Photo credit: Huyen Nguyen

Like other "isms," ageism hurts people, even kills. Older people who have internalized ageist attitudes lose years of life, according to [research by Becca Levy and colleagues at Yale University](#). Younger people immersed in ageism dread growing old, and spend untold energy trying to avoid it, instead of embracing every day of precious, incredible life.

How do we fight ageism?

- ▶ **Notice it.** This is harder than it might sound. Because we're awash in ageism, we take it for granted, making it harder to notice. But its prevalence also makes it easier to find. Notice it, label it, reject it. It's a toxic "ism" that has no rightful place in our heart/minds.
- ▶ **Ask, "Who benefits from ageism?"** Somebody's gaining something, and it's not us everyday humans.
- ▶ **Protest ageism when you see it.** Point it out, object to it, educate about it. Your protest can be humorous, angry, sly—any combination of attitudes that works for you in that moment. But make the sound, make the mark, take the stand.

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- ▶ **Join forces with others to fight the ageism that hurts us all.**
Start an ageism consciousness-raising group, using [this guide](#) from Ashton Applewhite.
- ▶ **Educate yourself about the realities and promise of aging.**
You'll find loads of resources (pre-filtered, per #2 above) on the website, [agingforlife.org](#).



Resources:

- ▶ Ashton Applewhite, [This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism](#)
- ▶ Applewhite's [website](#), which contains her fun blog, "Yo, is this ageist?"
- ▶ [Old School](#), a clearinghouse of anti-ageism resources.

04

Don't count on anti-aging miracles.

The race is on for biological therapies that will slow, stop, and even reverse the effects of aging. Billions of dollars—much of it from tech bros who struggle to imagine the world without them—are being spent at research universities and biotech companies from Harvard to Stanford



to first stop and then undo all of the microscopic damage cell division causes in our bodies (in every living thing, actually).

Because death is almost intolerably scary, humans have always engaged in frenetic searches for a fountain of youth. This time around, we seem to have so many more reasons for optimism than in the past: we have mapped the human genome, we have created astonishing machines that can amass vast quantities of data about how our bodies work, we have made giant strides in understanding and vanquishing some wicked disease processes. Surely, this time, we can do it—either greatly expand human life span (or “healthspan”—the number of years we can live largely disease-free), or escape aging altogether.

Here is a promising prospect: that basic research into the processes of aging will lead to highly effective treatments or even prevention for diseases associated with aging, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, arthritis, and dementia. More effective treatments for these diseases would save hundreds of billions of dollars and untold human suffering every year.

But the chances of this research “defeating” aging—or even significantly extending lifespans of those of us feeling our age today—are virtually nil. That’s partly because the quest itself reflects a failure of scale in (at least) two dimensions.

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The first is in imagining that our impressive technological accomplishments are comparable to the ingenuity of natural systems. In fact, the human body is an unimaginably intricate, evolved, organic whole. Humankind's most astounding inventions pale in comparison to the awe-inspiring complexity of our bodies.

The second failure in scale is our individual imagining of our centrality to Life, mistaking our innate egocentrism with a fact of value in the universe. A shocking reality for every human being is that our own experience of "I" is of foremost importance only to ourselves. An urgent belief in the necessity of indefinitely preserving our unique selves is a self-delusion born of our terror of death.

Want to live forever? Nurture younger generations. Work to make this world, today, a better place for the billions of people currently existing and to come. Model bravely how to cope with the heartbreaking reality of our limited time on this beautiful earth.



Resources:

- ▶ Marc Freedman, [*How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations*](#) and [*Encore*](#)
- ▶ Tad Friend, *New Yorker*, [Silicon Valley's Quest to Live Forever](#)
- ▶ Marisa Taylor, *Kaiser Health News*, [A Fountain of Youth Pill? Sure, if You're a Mouse.](#)

05

Count your blessings before you complain about aging.

Mainstream discourse about aging tacitly ignores poor, minority, single, and LGBTQ people. That's partly because these groups are not a market for all the anti-aging and aging-alleviating products and services being sold. It's also because these communities are routinely

ignored in mainstream discourse, and their joining another undesirable group—old people—doesn't suddenly make them more interesting. But those of us who are white and/or relatively wealthy need to keep a few shocking discrepancies in mind:



Photo credit: Maarten Deckers

- ▶ The longevity gap between rich and poor Americans is between 10 and 15 years on average. In some urban areas, your zip code can mean a 30-year gap in longevity.
- ▶ Chronic stress caused by poor education, poor health care, poor diet, and the lack of safe places to exercise, put poorer Americans at much higher risk of dementia, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and “deaths of despair”—suicide and drug overdose—than other Americans.
- ▶ Women aging alone make up more than 75% of elders living under the poverty limit. The cost of caregiving—for children and later for parents—falls predominantly on women, in the form of dramatically lower overall lifetime earnings, retirement accounts, and social security benefits.
- ▶ Dementia is a social justice issue that, as a society, we have the knowledge and means to address. We can largely prevent the poor education, exposure to environmental toxins, poor diet, and low rates of cardiovascular exercise that are key risk factors to brain health through the lifespan. We need to stop quaking about a coming wave of dementia patients as if we're victims of an inevitable age-related scourge. We are not.

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The point of this reminder is not to make you feel guilty for complaining about aging if you have a healthy 401(k) and a roof over your head. Aging is hard for everyone. But I hope it helps wealthier people put our suffering in context and advocate for systemic fixes for the endemic social problems we know cause snowballing misery from cradle to grave for far too many Americans.



Resources:

- ▶ Susan Jacoby, *Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age*
- ▶ Roge Karma, *The New Republic*, [The Gross Inequality of Death in America](#)
- ▶ Fredrick Kunkle, *Washington Post*, [Stress of poverty, racism raise risk of Alzheimer's for African Americans, new research suggests](#)

06

Embrace your aging heart/mind.

The myth that our brain power declines with age is pernicious, not least because it can become self-fulfilling. The final third of life (let's say, 60 to 90 and beyond) is a time of continued growth and development in healthy brains, and the large majority of us have healthy brains well into our 80s. Heart and mind are profoundly interconnected through many physiological mechanisms and processes. What affects one affects the other; it's important to tend lovingly to both.



Photo credit: Phillippe Leone

Here are some facts:

- ▶ Healthy brains never stop developing and changing. They begin growing and making connections in embryo and continue to the lip of the grave, continually resculpting themselves in response to experience.
- ▶ The aspects of brain function that do decline with age—for instance, raw speed on math problems, reaction times, and efficiency of short-term memory storage—are not the most important story about the aging brain.
- ▶ Among the most important positive changes as the brain ages is that it begins to use both hemispheres to solve increasingly complex problems, rather than relying on one or the other. This means greater flexibility and creativity in both everyday and more complex problem-solving.
- ▶ The brain's emotional circuitry matures and becomes more balanced with age. PET scanning shows that as we age we experience less intense negative emotions, pay less attention to negative than to positive emotional stimuli, and are less likely to remember negative than positive emotional materials.

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- ▶ Most important: older brains have learned more than younger brains, especially material too complicated or subtle to learn quickly. This, and the use of both hemispheres, is a huge asset in complex problem-solving.

Most supposedly age-related functional declines are the result of pathology. Healthy older brains—which, remember, most of us have—are often as good as or better than younger brains in a wide variety of tasks. Believe it. Respect it. Push back against ageist assumptions that say otherwise.



Resources:

- ▶ Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, [*The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*](#) and [*The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*](#)
- ▶ James Doty, MD, [*Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon's Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and the Secrets of the Heart*](#)
- ▶ Ellen Langer, [*Counter-Clockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*](#)
- ▶ Twyla Tharp, [*Keep It Moving: Lessons for the Rest of Your Life*](#)

07

Use your aging heart/mind.

Use it or lose it. It's never too late to start. Six categories of activity, regularly practiced, can significantly boost power, clarity, subtlety, and joy of heart/mind:



Photo credit: David Vilches

- ▶ **Pick challenging leisure activities that exercise your mind**—activities you love, not chores. Reading, dancing, board games, puzzles, musical instruments, language learning, teaching. Activities that make you work up a “mental sweat” push the continued creation and connection of neurons, shoring up your neural reserve.
- ▶ **Exercise physically.** Cardiovascular exercise increases blood flow to the brain and stimulates neurochemicals that increase brain cell survival, neural plasticity, and development of new neurons. Even if you've been a couch potato for decades, getting up and getting moving will benefit your body and heart/mind now.
- ▶ **Achieve mastery.** Pick one or more of your challenging activities and get really good at it. Dr. Gene Cohen writes that mastery confers a sense of control that can boost immune system cells. So go for it: pursuing an interest casually beats vegetating, but pursuing mastery works wonders for your heart/mind.
- ▶ **Establish strong social networks.** Feeling yourself to be a valued part of a pro-social group has profound positive effects on mind, body, and brain. Maintaining a social network can be hard later in life, especially if most of your social identity was tied up with work. But it's not only possible, it's life-saving.
- ▶ **Meditate.** Meditation is the ultimate exercise and balm for heart/mind. Meditation has long outgrown the woo-woo reputation it gained back in the 1960s and 1970s, with many peer-reviewed scientific studies showing the remarkable benefits of even a few weeks of practice. You can begin at any moment.

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- ▶ **Cultivate purpose.** Without a strong sense of purpose, all of your other activities lack a “So what?” Your purpose—which evolves as we live and learn—is what gets you up in the morning. Time spent clarifying your purpose periodically is repaid a thousand-fold.



Resources:

- ▶ [Palouse Mindfulness](#)—a superb free source of mindfulness training for beginners.
- ▶ [Volunteer Match](#)—find nearby opportunities to give of yourself.
- ▶ [Generations United](#)—get involved with younger generations who need you.
- ▶ [Sage-ing International](#)—a source of inspiration and community for elders.
- ▶ Richard Leider, [*The Power of Purpose: Find Meaning, Live Longer, Better*](#)
- ▶ Marion Roach Smith, [*The Memoir Project: A Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing and Life*](#). Lots of us turn to memoir to make sense of our lives; if you want to give it a try, you won't find a funnier, more practical guide than this one.

08

Don't let emotional turbulence freak you out. (Or, It's OK to not be serene.)

Millions of people have read about the “[Happiness U-Curve](#),” which purports to show that we tend to be happiest at the beginning and at the end of our lives. That seeming promise of effortless joy in late life feels almost like a birthright, just desserts for having clawed our way through all the challenges of the decades that went before.



Photo credit: Jeremy Bishop

Research does indicate that part of our ongoing brain development as we age inclines us to a greater sense of peace and satisfaction. Positive outlook is the norm, not just because of these brain changes, but because decades' worth of experience can help us put life's difficulties in perspective and give us greater confidence in our ability to cope. Paradoxically, knowing that we'll be out of it sooner rather than later can have a wonderfully calming effect.

That's all great news. But if you're not feeling particularly serene, it's not because you're aging wrong. Many factors affect our emotional state as we age: health, finances, relationships, a sense of purpose, unresolved trauma, a sense of having lived well, or not. And 30 years—from 60 to 90—is a long time. No one expects people from 30 to 60 to have similar, stable moods or life dispositions.

But what if “serenity” isn't the right goal in the first place? “The myth of serenity portrays old age as a kind of adult fairyland,” wrote Robert Butler, the brilliant geriatrician who coined the term “ageism” in 1969. Social critic Kathleen Woodward questions the value of what she calls the [myth of geriatric wisdom](#): in effect, that it's an opiate for the aged.

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We're supposed to be wise and retiring, in part because it's more pleasant for everyone else. It's considered "inappropriate" for elders to be full of embarrassing passion or righteous anger.

A big part of me wants to believe that, when I'm older, I'll be blessed with serenity and its gentle twin, wisdom. But right now, in my mid-60s, though I glimpse wisdom now and then, I also continue to wrestle with outrage, grief, self-doubt, curiosity, ambition, fear, and more, just as I have for all of my living memory.

Energy and angst in this late phase? These are signs of continuing life, not a failure to age well.



Resources:

- ▶ Bessel van der Kolk, [*The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*](#). If you do have unresolved trauma, and many of us do, this book is the best place to start to understand its impact in your life.
- ▶ [ProBoomer](#) by Paul Long is rocket fuel for people who are revved up instead of retiring in the last third.
- ▶ [The Growing Bolder Media Group](#), brainchild of Marc Middleton and friends, is another source of great inspiration and energy. I love the [podcast](#)!
- ▶ [Elders Climate Action](#), [Elders Action Network](#), and many other [work](#) and [activist](#) opportunities will reward your passion with new connections, community, and gratification of energy well-used.

09

Don't “retire” without a plan.

“Retiring” is a terrible word for a life phase. It might accurately describe a type of person (a type I’ll never be, pity my husband), someone who is typically shy, self-effacing, semi-invisible to all but the most patient and sensitive others, bless them. But for a life phase lasting, now, 20 to 30 or more years? No. The word and all associated leisure-and-travel-and-leisure images need to disappear. Whatever we decide to call it (Rewirement™? Refirement? Elderhood? Phase IV?), don’t leap into those years without a plan.



Photo credit: Daniele Levis Pelusi

Not just a financial plan, which is certainly important—though a fantasy for far too many people left behind in our economy. We need a life plan for our post-working years: a plan for how to define and fulfill our purpose, to continue (or begin) to contribute or create in a way that makes our heart sing.

Lucky us, the world is now bursting with guidance for life-planning for “retirement.”



Resources:

- ▶ Jeri Sedlar and Rick Miners, [*Don't Retire, REWIRE™: 5 steps to Fulfilling Work That Fuels Your Passion, Suits Your Personality, and Fills Your Pockets*](#) (3rd edition).
- ▶ Sara Zeff Geber, [*Essential Retirement Planning for Solo Agers*](#)
- ▶ Roberta Taylor and Dorian Mintzer, [*The Couple's Retirement Puzzle: 10 Must-Have Conversations for Creating an Amazing New Life Together*](#)
- ▶ Find a retirement coach through [Retirement Options](#) or [Retirement Coaches Association](#).

10

Understand that there's a deadline.

I am going to die. You are going to die. Every living thing on the planet is going to die. Death is integral to the cycle of life. Facing this reality is the hardest thing most of us will ever do. It can also be the most freeing. Virtually everyone who has had a near death experience, or who has recovered from what might have been a fatal illness, brings us the same message: their terrifying brush with death made them appreciate life more fully than they ever had before. Nothing can awaken our appreciation of the glory and mystery of this one single life we have than truly taking in that it will end.



Photo credit: Jahsie Ault

Just a few generations ago, even among relatively affluent white Americans, death was an intimate life companion. Death from infectious diseases, childbirth, heart disease, accidents, environmental toxins, and other causes came far more frequently and sooner than it does today. Hence, our current “longevity boom.” In the last couple of generations, massive social forces have converged to sweep death under the rug. Now, Americans have to go out of our way to reacquaint ourselves with death. Only by doing so can we fully appreciate this moment, this breath, this one irreplaceable life.

Here’s a small selection of excellent resources for considering death, and this list doesn’t even touch the arts, perhaps our greatest teacher.

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Resources:

- ▶ Barbara Coombs-Lee, [*Finish Strong: Putting Your Priorities First at Life's End*](#)
- ▶ Ram Dass, [*Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*](#)
- ▶ Atul Gawande, [*Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*](#)
- ▶ [Compassion and Choices](#) provides [comprehensive tools](#) for helping us think through how we want to be treated at the end of our lives.
- ▶ [The Conversation Project](#) provides booklets to facilitate conversations among family and friends about how we want to die.
- ▶ [Spirituality & Practice](#) has an excellent set of links to books and articles from different cultural and spiritual perspectives about facing death.
- ▶ [The Order of the Good Death](#) hosts conversation and information about all aspects of death.

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Theresa Reid, PhD, is the founder and executive producer of agingforlife.org, a non-commercial website offering a curated set of resources to help us make compassionate sense of our aging. Dr. Reid has lived a surprisingly long while and is learning faster all the time. For more, visit agingforlife.org.

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