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The Michael Friedman Trio

Digital Image by Michael Friedman

AGING WELL IS NOT AN OXYMORON

By
Michael B. Friedman

Of course I like it when someone tells me I'm not old. But I always insist I *am* old, and that they are ageists, unwitting captives of Western culture's misconception of the meaning of old age. "You believe," I say "that old means being decrepit, over the hill, used up, finished? Sorry, that's just not the case. You can be old *and* good." Or, to say it another way, contrary to the ageist bias of modern, Western societies, it is possible to age well.

This has two meanings. One is the obvious fact that people are living longer, healthier, and with fewer disabilities. We are, or could be, a big part of the solution to the problem of an aging society, in which non-working age populations—children and old people—will soon be almost as large as the population of people of working age, who support them. The Census Bureau and other organizations refer to this as the “dependency ratio”, ignoring the fact that most old people are *not* dependent on the generation of working adults. We can work, we can volunteer, and some of us have saved enough money to pay our own way in retirement. We are the “bonus generation”, as Neal Lane, former director of the NYS Office of the Aging used to say of the baby boomers becoming elder boomers.

Plus, most old people still know how to have a good time. Our parties may seem staid compared to the loud efforts of the young to find happiness in music that drowns out conversation, but we still have fun. We can even still have sex, I am very pleased to say.

Really, there’s no need to feel sorry for most of us.

That said, the fact that we can age well does not mean that it’s possible to stay young. Yes, many old people these days manage to hold off the declines of old age longer than our parents did. And there is a thriving industry in anti-aging that promises (falsely) that most of us can stay young if only we do the right exercises, eat the right foods, do crossword puzzles, and use the right face creams. But until the Fountain of Youth finally gets discovered, people will experience declines as they age. They will develop more chronic health conditions. Over time physical and mental abilities will diminish. Youthful good looks will give way to (hmm what to call it?) mature bodies.

This brings us to the second meaning of “aging well”, to the view that aging well is *not* about staying young. Not about avoiding sags and wrinkles. Not about avoiding chronic health conditions and declines in our mental and physical abilities. Not about having the drive and energy that we used to have. Not about being as productive as always. Not about avoiding all disabilities, and certainly not about fighting off death.

On this view, aging well is about our inner experience while living with inevitable changes that seem a sad fate when we are young, but are accepted by those who age well, who understand that this is just the way life is. Ultimately, aging well simply means feeling good about ourselves and our lives when we are old.

Researchers refer to these two different meanings of aging well as “objective successful aging” and “subjective successful aging.” Bloodless terminology for sure, but what the researchers mean is both simple and important. So-called objective successful aging means that you are healthy, cognitively intact, not disabled, and still engage in social and productive activities. In contrast, subjective successful aging is based on older people’s experiences of themselves and their lives. If they are satisfied—perhaps even happy—with their lives, they are aging well no matter what their physical and cognitive condition.

While most old people are *not* decrepit and dependent, many studies (using extremely limited criteria) conclude that most older adults do not meet criteria for objective successful aging. Using the traditional definition of successful aging formulated by John Rowe and Robert Kahn more than a quarter of a century ago, a study in 2010 concluded that fewer than 15% of older adults meet the criteria for objective successful aging. Happily, these studies also conclude that, despite these findings, most older adults feel *good* about their lives. Most older adults *do* age well subjectively. No doubt it is useful to know how to age well objectively, how to stay healthy enough to lead an independent life. But I personally think it is more interesting to know how to age well *subjectively* and, despite the unavoidable declines of aging, to find happiness and peace of mind.

The same research above has revealed a few important characteristics of people who age well subjectively. First, they have developed a number of key personality traits as they matured, including a positive attitude, optimism, adaptability, and resilience.

Second, older people who are satisfied with their lives have relationships with people they like and care about and who like and care about them. Being isolated is an enemy of successful aging.

Third, they engage in activities that they find pleasurable, valuable, and/or meaningful. Old people who age well may or may not be “productive”; but they are busy, and often they make important contributions as grandparents, volunteers, and mentors

The information about helpful personality traits is, unfortunately, not terribly useful to people who have grown old without these traits. It is hard to change personalities in old age. But most people who are unhappy because they are isolated and/or inactive can push themselves, or be helped, to engage in social relationships and activities that they may find satisfying. Those who find it exceedingly difficult are probably suffering from depression, anxiety, or other mental or substance use disorders (about 20% of older adults living in the community). For them, treatment can help, as can exercise, long walks, yoga, creative activities, and other non-medical remedies.

Implicit in all of this are two very important lessons.

First, it is critical to understand old age (indeed all of human life) from a developmental perspective. What does that mean? It’s simple. Who we are as babies is different from who we are as toddlers is different from who we are in elementary school is different from who we are as adolescents, as young adults, and as working age adults with family and community responsibilities. And all of these stages are different from becoming old—which is a period of life with several stages itself.

A developmental perspective is fundamentally *optimistic* because it postulates that each stage of life has different challenges to meet, and in old age, some of them are

daunting. However, we can meet these challenges well or meet them poorly. There is still hope for living well in old age.

Second, there is a huge difference between the outer and the inner perspective on a person's life. I, an old man now, look on the stage of adolescence with a sense of horror. Please don't take me back. Similarly, younger adults frequently look on being old—especially if it involves some fundamental losses—with a sense of dread about their own futures. From the outside vantage point of youth, old age can seem grim. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that from the inner vantage point of the people we become when we are old, life can be very, very good. Take it from me.

(Michael Friedman retired in 2010, having worked as a social worker, administrator, public official, and mental health advocate for over 4 decades. He is still an Adjunct Associate Professor at Columbia School of Social Work. He also is a semi-professional jazz pianist and a photographer and print maker, whose work is exhibited frequently.)