

What A Drag It Is Growing Old - Personal Reflections on Ways to Cope with Changing Physical Capabilities as We Age



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Submission: August 29, 2023; **Published:** September 13, 2023

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Abstract

In this brief article we discuss successful and authentic aging, emphasizing that rather than seeing aging as a drag we should embrace it. Through anecdotes that embed ideas, the authors present ways that we each are coming to terms with our own constantly changing physical appearance and capabilities and discuss some of the ways that each of has coped with these as we continue to age.

Keywords: Health Maintenance; Successful Aging; Authentic Aging; Happiness; Taoism; Tai Chi; Yoga; Qigong; Age-Appropriate Exercise; Diet; Positive Psychology

What a drag it is getting old [1]

The (Wo)Man in The Mirror

We know from fairy tales that mirrors can be important elements in the past, present and future of the characters who gaze into them. But everywhere I go, whenever I look in a mirror, I am shocked to see an old fat person looking back at me. Who is this strange person invading my mirror and why are they following me?

Is there anything I can do about this intrusion on my self-image? How may I reframe my perceptions to make that image more welcoming? How can I become more content with who I am right now.

In this article, through anecdotes that embed ideas, the authors seek to present the ways that we each are coming to terms with our own constantly changing physical appearance and capabilities and discuss some of the ways that each of has coped with these as we continue to age.

The Changing Nature of Time [2]

“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”

Dr Seuss

No matter how much the anti-aging industry may try to persuade us differently, ultimately, we cannot outrun aging or death. For unlike Sisyphus, who did so twice [3], we are unlikely to cheat death. And although we mortals may escape pushing boulders up hills for eternity, nevertheless, as Franklin once quipped, nothing is certain except death and taxes. When we are working, we are kept busy dealing with day-to-day necessities. But as we age, especially if we are lucky enough to retire, time is a contradiction. For while each day is a gift, full of opportunities, there is often next to nothing on a retiree's calendar, and the number of days left in life is diminishing. This, coupled with dealing with the unexpected deaths of old friends, may sometimes sadden and remind us of our own mortality. So, as we age how do we avoid the Marcel Proust trap: constantly seeking solace and meaning in our life by reflecting on experiences and memories from our past 'glory days' to avoid our world ending, "not with a bang but with a whimper" [4]. How do we keep each day interesting for ourselves?

Authentic Aging - Being Content with Your Life as It Is.

Authentic Aging [5] reframes ideas about Successful Aging [6] which suggests as we age we aim for optimal physical and cognitive health with an absence of disease/disability and full engagement with social life. These ideas have permeated societal thought about aging and created an atmosphere that puts the onus on all of us as individuals to take care of our own health and treat it as a choice [7]. Authentic aging suggests that *everyone* has value simply in *being*, as we *are*, no matter what our life choices, or even an inability to choose.

This links to Taoist philosophy which sees life as a river that continually flows forward [8]. From a Taoist perspective it is not that we should forget the lessons of the past, nor abdicate planning for the future but ultimately, we must live in *this* moment and experience it fully. For it is the only moment we can be sure about.

- In accepting this each of us must:
- Acknowledge our journey and its successes and failures; moments of happiness and grief; and even those moments of boredom or depression.
- Accept who we are now - that we are the sum of all the moments that went before and led to THIS moment.
- Live fully in this moment
- As we age, even when living fully in each moment, there are times you may feel a need to look forward, to and plan for:
- Seeing children / grandchildren
- Trips to places or friends
- Weekly events e.g., bingo
- Weddings / reunions

Trying To Stay Healthy - Coping with Changing Circumstances

A friend recently quipped, "I'm supposed to have bad hearing, bad vision, and nothing to say. So, from now on, I'm practicing selective hearing, not paying attention and no filters on talking!"

After giving me a couple of simple exercises for a sore shoulder, the physiotherapist saw I could painfully reach to the level of my head. He said, "You have functional movement. What more do you want?" Instead of warnings to 'stay vigilant', these biases can catapult us into decline.

Our mindset, our self-talk, our attitude is often our greatest obstacle to enjoying life to its fullest. There are simple, easy ways to improve our lives despite all variables. How we think about ourselves, or a situation affects everything. When I (GMF) first met my trainer [9] and commented that "at my age, I wanted to avoid 'overworking'", she agreed, but reminded me that: "your muscles

don't know what age they are! They want to be worked." This is pivotal information!

I've (GMF) found that when angst, panic, dread, worry begin to creep up, one of Bernie's trademark pieces of advice: just "breath and smile" - becomes the best 'medicine'. It provides me with momentary relief and starts to become a way of improving the quality of the moment and the day.

Improving Quality of Life

- If you are happy as you are *now*.
- Accept this and stick to the path you are on.
- IF you feel a need to make changes to your lifestyle to achieve specific goals
- Make an age appropriate and realistic plan.
- Start on that path until you feel the desire to change it.

If you decide you want to make changes here are some suggestions.

Diet/Cooking - Some Notes

To Reduce Ill Health from dietary sources

- Identifying your food triggers/cravings e.g.:
- Do you have specific stressors?
- Do you crave sugary or salty foods?
- Do you over fill your plate?
- Do you always go back for second or third helpings?

If you prepare your own meals:

- Plan colourful & balanced meals / weekly menus!
- Even if you're not vegetarian, add lots of different coloured vegetables/fruits to your meals.
- Rotate starches / proteins.
- Choose healthy snacks.
- Add teas (especially oolong or green) to your diet.
- Drink lots of water
- Reduce alcohol and sodas to a minimum.

Exercise - Some Notes

Setting Realistic and Age-Appropriate Goals

- WHY? Am I doing this e.g., stay healthy / going to a wedding etc.
- Make whatever you choose to do enjoyable.
- ENJOYMENT ☞ Motivation - THE key to sustainable goals

Bert Amies always used to say that motivation is the key to success [10] - however, enjoyment is a key to staying motivated and achieving sustainable goals.

Choose age and ability appropriate enjoyable routines and activities, you can accomplish.

- There are many great exercises and ideas on Instagram/Internet, however, be aware that:
 - Most videos are NOT targeting older adults or addressing specific physical restrictions.
 - The number of repetitions / speeds NOT doable for most people and more importantly
 - Start at your own pace and only do what you can do.
 - IF you wish slowly build up the number of repetitions and speed

Pay attention to any diminished physical capability. If it is due to injury or illness or a particular action... is there something you might do to avoid or reverse the situation? If there isn't then work within your capabilities, with the one caveat - do not use your restrictions not to try.

A friend in her 90's complained that she and her retirement home friends were falling. They collectively wondered 'why we lose our legs first?' A recent study [11] showed that legs can be strengthened with simple exercises done at home. Likewise, before turning to 'waddling', limping, canes, or walkers too soon, realize that aches, pains, niggles can often disappear with a little attention and targeted work.

Coping with Changing Circumstances – Some Suggestions

In a recent article [12], I (BW) documented my struggles with the changes to my health upon my retirement. I also identified that I stubbornly wish to continue to take ownership of my own health and not abdicate this responsibility solely to physicians and big Pharma.

In the seven years since leaving work this struggle has continued but remained manageable. However, our middle daughter's destination wedding in October 2022, created a tsunami of problems for me precipitating a major health crisis.

The wedding created financial hardship and emotional stress. Like many others during the pandemic lockdown, I had been cooking and eating a lot, and my weight had been slowly creeping up. However, the wedding preparations precipitated stress eating, and the week itself presented excesses of food and drink.

Upon return I attended a regular doctor's appointment. I discovered that my weight had skyrocketed 20+lbs (10Kilos), I had elevated blood pressure and unhealthy cholesterol numbers. After a good deal of discussion, my physician agreed to let me

design a Self-Directed Program to control my BP and Cholesterol and so avoid use of medications. And that we would revisit the numbers in a few months.

My plan was simple but not easy. Identify dietary factors that were affecting my health and change my diet accordingly. To this end I:

- Continued my healthy menu planning and healthy eating [13], but
 - Cut out ALL added salt![14]
 - Cut out butter!
 - Reduced my alcohol consumption by 60% (0-3 standard drinks a day).
 - Increased my consumption of milk oolong tea, and water.
 - Researched dietary supplements to help reduce my BP/Cholesterol/Triglyceride levels. To this end I started taking Red Rice Yeast [15]; Organic Beetroot Capsules [16]; and increased my Omega 3 intake [17].
 - In addition,
 - I worked to reduce my stress by focussing on the positive and on reducing negative thoughts and actions.
 - I increased my physical activity.
 - Added isometric hand grip training [18]
 - Added swimming laps to my routine (10-20 mins at least 4 times a week)
 - Continued with:
 - My daily martial arts practice (30-45 mins per day) [19].
 - Regular floor-based yoga (3-4 times a week) [19].
 - Walking for groceries to stores (7-10 miles a week).
 - Walking up and down 6 flights of stairs daily.

I am happy to report that over 4 months I lost 22lbs and 2.5 inches from my waist. Most importantly my BP and cholesterol came down within normal parameters for my age. [20] and I am continuing with this program in consultation with my physician, and continue to closely watch my BP, Cholesterol and Triglyceride numbers.

Maintaining / Building Circles of Friends

Sometimes, in an effort to stay on top of health, our medical appointments can become our social lives. But it's interactions with friends that can have a most profound impact on our health and outlook. What researchers of aging and gerontology have found is that most people are resilient. They find ways to create connections with others, which helps them cope in changing life situations such as: finding that one can rely on same age

friends after loss [21]; finding new relationships with others after institutionalization [22]; and seeking new companionship through online dating [23,24].

A few other thoughts on finding useful health information:

- Don't be afraid to talk to a friendly pharmacist: they are often spot on and have some excellent advice.
- Talk to friends about their experiences.
- If you don't have a computer, good watch or even iPad, talk to friends who do or go to a library as they usually have computers available.

Looking Forwards – Embracing Aging

While researching for my PhD I (CH) was struck by how many writers have discussed viewing photos of themselves, in their young lives and being taken aback by those images and their lack of wrinkles. A common refrain was, "This is me. But it is not me." I am still the person in that image but have evolved into being a different person at the same time.

It seems that the struggle is finding balance and congruence between temporal states in our lives, as having a past (but not living exclusively in nostalgia), having a present (an appreciation of each breath without remaining static), and a future with possibilities and growth (without putting off living until tomorrow).

But how do we do this? How do we fight against urges to withdraw, outrun age by staying perpetually busy, or conceal it through altering ourselves to meet unrealistic ideals?

The key may be to get over these impulses and realize that we are doing the best with what we have and overcome our own ego to embrace this time in our lives. Relish the opportunity to fully experience it. We can go beyond social and self-acceptance in aging and move to a place where we embrace this time in life as aspirational.

The secret seems to be in always having something to look forward to. Be it a small thing such as lunch or a television program or going to a weekly social event like attending bingo on a Monday, to larger things like celebrations. Even an afterlife can be part of this future orientation.

We can overcome our own ego and take the photo, eat the cake, recognize change and do it anyway. Be visible and show up for our lives by planning for one small achievable step. Don't be afraid to be visible and take up the space you need to make connections, be it talking with a cashier at a drugstore, or making a phone call to someone you haven't spoken to in a while. Realize that moving to self-acceptance and expression in aging is a process of these small steps, not a single result.

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DOI: [10.19080/JCMAH.2023.12.555834](https://doi.org/10.19080/JCMAH.2023.12.555834)

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