



Attitudes

ABOUT AGING

By Teresa Lewis

Research shows optimists
are healthier, live longer

Dorothy, a Hospice patient and resident of the Fargo Pioneer House, survived the Great Depression.

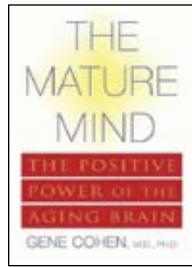
She owns a memory as fruitful as her old age and can recall the dollar amount she paid for her first home. She also remembers what her family charged for rent in an apartment building they once owned.

Clear-minded and optimistic, Dorothy knows her life will soon come to an end. But despite what many would consider a grim and inevitable reality, she has no regrets.

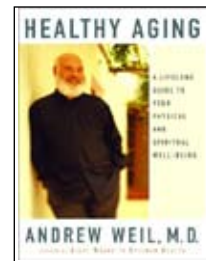
Resources

Many sources for seniors are targeted toward health ailments with little information about a healthy mindset. Here are two that emphasize the importance of attitude:

Title:
The Mature Mind:
The Positive Power
of the Aging Brain
Author:
Gene D. Cohen,
MD, PhD



Title:
Healthy Aging: A
Lifelong Guide to
Your Well-Being
Author:
Andrew Weil, MD



Dorothy admits there were struggles. But despite the hardships of enduring the dusty 1930s, along with countless other experiences younger people only read about in history books, she says, “I don’t have one bad thing to say about anything or anyone.”

In fact, according to the study, negative attitudes about aging were found to diminish life expectancy.

Becca R. Levy, PhD, of Yale University, and her colleagues discovered that adults with positive attitudes about aging lived 7.5 years longer than their peers with negative attitudes. They concluded that “self-perceptions of aging had a greater impact on survival than did gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness and functional health.”

Additionally, they found that positive self-perceptions can have a greater effect on longevity than maintaining optimal blood pressure or cholesterol, exercising regularly and living tobacco-free.

Nix negativity

What if you recognize that your own stereotypes are not

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No regrets she says, because, simply put, she has experienced “a wonderful life.”

Dorothy admits there were struggles. But despite the hardships of enduring the dusty 1930s, along with countless other experiences younger people only read about in history books, she says, “I don’t have one bad thing to say about anything or anyone. ... I remember all the good times; I couldn’t have had it any nicer.” If they had problems as a family, “We worked through them,” she says.

Pioneer House administrator Lyle Erickson knows many residents—like Dorothy—who possess positive outlooks. These residents, he says, tend to have a lot of social support because of their optimism.

Erickson even speculates that happier residents have probably lived longer because of it.

Let go of stereotypes

Dorothy’s story of longevity, optimism and clarity of mind defies several stereotypes of the elderly. We all hold certain perceptions about aging. Perhaps it’s a belief that you won’t be able to be physically active. Or it could be a fear of losing one’s mental faculties. Many of us develop these beliefs at an early age, which can progress into lifelong anxieties about our own aging process.

However, according to recent research, you could live longer if you adopt a more positive outlook about aging.

A recently published study in *Psychological Science Journal* found that positive attitudes about aging might prolong life expectancy—perhaps more than seven years.



Dorothy's wisdom, in her own words:

- Cherish your family
- Children are a gift; take care of them

- Be thankful every day
- Have faith and know that everything will be all right
- Be responsible for yourself

helpful? How do you change your own beliefs?

First, you must become aware of your negative thoughts.

Recognize the little voice in your head when it speaks up. Then, substitute that thought with the positive version of it. It's critical to replace the negative with something positive.

Likewise, if you tell yourself not to think of older people as senile, you will still focus on the very thing you want to avoid.

Once you identify that thought, turn it into a positive, such as "with age comes wisdom and when I'm that age, I hope to be so wise."

Chat about change

Parents sometimes have a strong influence over their offspring's perceptions of older individuals.

Do yourself and the young people in your life a favor by finding the good in growing older and talking about it as a family.

More Good News About Aging

In our society, there is a widely held belief that as you age, your mental faculties deteriorate. Gene D. Cohen, MD, PhD, founder and director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., dismisses this only as a myth. He states that brain decay only happens through disease.

In the absence of disease, there is no decay. Because your mind affects your body and your physical state affects how you think and feel, Cohen identifies five strategies to maintain your mental clarity:

- Exercise mentally
- Exercise physically
- Pick challenging leisure activities
- Master hobbies and interests
- Establish strong social networks

The MacArthur Foundation's Consortium reports that 30 percent of the characteristics of aging are based on genetics; 70 percent are based on the

daily choices we make.

Again, our thoughts, beliefs and images are part of that 70 percent factor.

This knowledge, coupled with our understanding of how our attitude affects our aging, gives us a wonderful

opportunity to make the most of our golden years. **f**

Teresa Lewis is owner of The Growth Coach. She lives outside of Fargo with her husband and two beautiful daughters.

The Village Family Magazine editor Lonna Whiting contributed to this report.

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