



Ageing: all in the

Does the thought of growing older fill you with a sense of dread and impending gloom? *Dr Harriet Radermacher* talks us through the psychology of ageing.

Do you associate being old with deteriorating health and capacity, increasing dependency on others, disengagement with the world, dementia, and eventual admission to a nursing home? You are not alone – but you could be way off the mark.

With so many negative messages about growing old and being ‘past your use-by date’, especially for women, and pressure to look and act younger at any cost, it’s not surprising that a woman in her 50s might start to think ‘it’s all downhill from here’. Health professionals may also hold this view, but it is important to know that decline is not an inevitable part of the ageing process.

Growing older is accompanied by ongoing changes that can be quite daunting for many people. At various times in our lives, we may feel the need to take stock of our life directions and do a reality check on our hopes and aspirations. Is this where I thought I’d be (at 25, 35, 50, 65...)? At mid-life we

might find ourselves asking: am I likely to live longer than my parents did and, if so, do I have the means (finances, health and fitness, people in my life) to go the distance and enjoy the ride?

While a common response to getting older is feeling that life’s options are narrowing, for many people, later life can be a time of new and exciting opportunities. The current generation, especially Baby Boomers, are transforming the image of older age into one of freedom, adventure and possibilities, with some choosing to free themselves of family and other responsibilities.

Depression is not an inevitable part of growing older. However, some of the symptoms of depression in older adults (including loss of interest in life, impaired memory, poor sleep) can be incorrectly attributed to old age or even dementia. This means the depression can go undiagnosed and untreated. So if you do have persistent depressive symptoms, or concerns about

chronic illness, memory or sleeping, it is worth seeking advice from your general practitioner as a first port of call.

Feeling pessimistic and worrying about getting older is normal, but what can you do to cope with these feelings and make life fulfilling (again)? All of us want to age well, but how can we help ourselves along the way? There is the usual list of ingredients (well supported by research evidence), such as regular physical activity, not smoking, moderate alcohol intake, regular small and healthy meals, spending time with friends and family, and stimulating your mind by learning a new skill or taking up a hobby. Furthermore, doing these things may not only reduce the risk of many chronic diseases, but can also reduce the risk of depression.

But I know all this - what else can I do?

One constant in life is that everything changes. Therefore our ability to cope and adapt to change is vital. If your health or

mind?

capacity changes, try to focus on what you can do, not what you can't. Keep an open mind about new opportunities. You might discover that it was your own narrow thinking that allowed you to see only a few limited options. Be mindful of the messages you choose to receive from the outside world. There are many myths and negative stereotypes around ageing. Determine how you are going to approach your latter years – don't simply take on the views of others.

Do you have unrealistic or inflexible expectations about the person you are or what you think you should have achieved to date? Why not reassess what you value, and what's important in your life? Is it having a meaningful occupation, or good relationships with family and friends? Set some new goals if you're a goal-setting type of person, although not everyone is.

While some people believe that it's natural for older people to withdraw from public life, there is another school of thought that productivity can last into your 80s and beyond. Shutting down too soon may not be good for your physical and emotional health. You can still make your mark on the world. On the other hand, you might not want to postpone that long-awaited travel for too long – the best time is when you are still fit and can afford it – and that might be right now!

It's important to have things to look forward to each day, no matter how big or small. Do things that make you smile and give you joy, and try to surround yourself by positive, active, healthy people – or at least with relationships (whether friends, family, or intimate) that are two-way, and don't take more from you emotionally than they give back.

If you are feeling financially vulnerable, get some sound financial advice, so you can plan effectively for your post-earning future. This can be particularly important for women approaching retirement, who typically have less superannuation and fewer assets than men.

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One thing the longest living communities on the planet have in common is that people allocate a small part of each day to meditation or religious practice. Even just reminding yourself to breathe, slowly, can help you to better manage your inflammatory and behavioural response to stress, leading to improved health outcomes.

Keeping a positive attitude toward ageing is particularly important as it allows you to continue to feel good and have a sense of control as you face another part of the life cycle. And working out the difference between what you can control, and what you can't, can really help to turn unhelpful angst into productive planning for what's ahead. ■

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If you find it difficult to change aspects of your life, motivate yourself to exercise more or get out for social activities, a psychologist can help. Psychologists are trained to help people manage stress and adjust to difficult life circumstances, as well as treat psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety.

To consult a psychologist, ask your GP for a referral or contact the Australian Psychological Society's 'Find a Psychologist' referral service by phone on 1800 333 497 or [online](#).

For further information about positive ageing read these Australian Psychological Society [tipsheets](#).