

What We Believe Shapes How We Age

By Ron Pevny

What do you believe your later years will look like? Many of us never even think about the beliefs we carry inside us as our months become years and years turn into decades. Your beliefs may well determine the answer to this question.

In recent years, a host of research has been adding its voice to the age-old wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions in emphasizing the importance of belief and attitude in determining how our lives unfold. Some compelling and well-publicized research was done in the Yale School of Public Health by professor Becca Levy. In the study, a very large number of middle age people were interviewed six times over the course of 20 years. They were asked whether they agreed with statements like: "As you get older, you're less useful." What they found was the perceptions held by people about aging had more impact on how long they would live than did their blood pressure, their cholesterol level, whether they smoked, or even whether they exercised.

The study found that the people who had positive perceptions of aging lived an average of seven and a half years longer than those with negative images of growing older. They also found that those with negative images of aging not only had compromised health and shortened lives; they also had more distress and depression in the present. People with negative perceptions of aging were more likely to consider their lives in the present worthless, empty or hopeless; those with more positive perceptions of aging were more likely to view their lives as fulfilling, joyful, and having meaning and purpose.

Let's look at two very different sets of beliefs about aging. Since the "modern" era began, aging has largely been seen as a time of decline, loss, and withdrawal from active contribution. Look up the word "retire" in the dictionary; most of the definitions include the word "withdraw." Accompanying this view is the belief, held in both overt and subtle ways, that once we retire, "it's all downhill from here." Our best years are over, with us by and large having made our significant

contribution to society. Loss of a sense of purpose and meaning, and a flagging of our passions for life, is to be expected. The best we can do is hold on to who we have been for as long as possible; do our best to stay healthy; enjoy life to the extent our health and finances will allow; find things to keep us occupied; and hope things turn out okay.

Contrast this with another set of beliefs that sees aging as a process of development of character analogous to the development of fine wine over time. Aging is understood as a necessary prerequisite for developing the wisdom that comes only from experience and reflection upon that experience. This stage of our life provides time and opportunity for focusing on our deepest values, our personal development, our spiritual life, and our relationships with our loved ones and communities. These decades are not just the final chapter after we have passed our prime, but rather a time full of possibility for fulfillment, meaning, passion and active community engagement—if we consciously work to make them so.

If we resonate in some way with this second view of aging, a critical first step, whether we are past so called “retirement age” or in midlife and becoming to think about our elder years, is exploring with as much honesty as we can muster, the beliefs we hold about aging. Living in a youth-obsessed society and being surrounded by disempowering beliefs throughout our lives, most of us have disempowering beliefs engrained in our minds and are strongly influenced by them. One way to know how much they influence us is to honestly look at the fears and beliefs we carry about aging. We can reflect on questions such as these, and do our best to honestly answer them:

- Do I find myself trying to convince myself and others that I am not getting older? If so, what beliefs about aging does this reflect? How does it benefit me to continue to hold these beliefs?
- Do I believe that once I reach retirement age, it’s basically all downhill from here? If so, why?
- What is the vision I have for what my elder years can be? If it is a positive, empowering vision, am I willing to live intentionally so that my vision can become reality. If I have no vision or a negative vision and am content with letting things unfold as they will, will that serve my wellbeing as I age?

- Do I believe my worth is primarily tied to what I can do, or is it a reflection of the kind of person I can be? Which of these beliefs will best serve me as I age?
- Do I see my life as an unfolding process of inner growth, or is growth not something important to me? If I consider growth important, what opportunities can aging offer me to grow?
- Do I believe I can move forward gracefully in the face of loss, such as the increasing losses that accompany aging? If so, how can I further strengthen my resilience? If not, why not?
- Do I believe it is worth it for me to stretch beyond my comfort zone in order to find fulfillment as I grow older? If so, am I willing to do so?
- Do I believe I can learn from people I know or know of who seem to be models for aging well, and from people who seem to age without joy and purpose.? Am I willing to observe, reflect and learn from both types of people?
- Do I believe that my beliefs make a difference in how my life turns out?

The more we engage in denial of our aging, the more we allow ourselves to buy into our culture's belief that older adults are largely irrelevant, the greater our risk of being painfully unprepared for the inevitable losses as well as the unique opportunities that accompany us on our journey through our elder life chapters. We have the power to choose the beliefs that shape our lives. We have the power to act intentionally to chart a course for an elderhood of purpose, passion, service and continual growth in whatever circumstances life presents.

If we are in midlife, it is not too early to begin to focus on developing those personal qualities and beliefs that will best support a vital elderhood when we reach that point. Most of us begin many years before retirement to prepare financially for the elder third or fourth of our life. Isn't it at least as important to prepare emotionally and spiritually?

If we are in our 60s, 70s and beyond, it is certainly not too late. Using the power of positive beliefs, commitment to continual growth, refusal to let ourselves be marginalized because of our age, and dedication to making a difference through serving others, our elder years can be the pinnacle of our development as human beings. Such an elderhood will only happen if we are willing to believe it can be our reality, and to do the inner work of growing into that reality.

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