

ACT

WINTER - 2018 NEWSLETTER

Acceptance: Discovering Aging on its Own Terms

Who is happiest? Younger or older people? In our culture which glamorizes youthfulness, most people would think younger people are happier. But in fact, when happiness is measured, older people are the happiest in general. Why is this? One reason is that as we age, we seem to be able to accept life as it is and likely feel less regret about the past. According to Hannes Schwandt, an economist at Princeton University, "This combination of accepting life and feeling less regret about the past is what makes life satisfaction increase," especially after people pass about age 50 years old. And, as we get older we become more able to choose activities based on what we want to do, not just on what we must do to earn a living or to meet other people's demands. We still have goals, but as we get older those goals may be more focused, and they ideally reflect what we value most in life.

Another vital part of acceptance as we age is to realize that with aging, being "normal" is very broad. Just like in adolescence, people change in different ways - some faster and some slower - creating a wide range of "normal." The same is true of aging - there is no "one size fits all." People who understand this will be happier.

More importantly, we should avoid "medicalizing" the normal changes of aging. I recently wrote an article commenting on studies to prevent dementia. The subtitle was "No Magic Bullet." There is no one thing that will prevent dementia, although we'd like that magic bullet! The same applies to aging - the only magic bullet to stop aging is not aging. That means dying. While there is a time and place when we will all die, we shouldn't fall victim to the false belief that we can stop aging with a pill or a medical procedure. What we can do is stay active with regular exercise and social activities, keep our brains active, and focus on what gives our lives meaning and how we can contribute to others and the communities we live in.

We should also strive to adapt to the changes that aging brings. As an example, I used to be an avid mountain climber but a few years ago, I realized I was no longer physically able to do that safely. Rather than try to do something I couldn't do safely or give up the mountains altogether, I chose to become an active hiker, continue skiing, and try other activities in the mountains with my wife. Eventually, I hope to share those experiences with my grandkids.

Acceptance is a key to aging that I've learned from ACT subjects and my study of aging. I thank all of you for what you've taught me and the greater community, which has benefited from the lessons learned from our ACT study over these many years!

Warm regards,

Eric B. Larson, MD, MPH

P.S. You might be interested to learn that *Enlightened Aging* was reviewed in *The Lancet*, which is perhaps the most prominent international medical journal (<http://www.thelancet.com>, Vol. 391, January 27, 2018). The review by Louise Robinson, a geriatrics researcher at Newcastle University in England, featured an ACT subject and character in the book who demonstrated both acceptance and resilience by tango dancing in Argentina at age 100, and accepting and adapting to changes as she aged until her death at 107! An inspiration to all of us.

JUST FOR FUN:

Question: What is a sleeping brain's favorite musical group?

Answer: R.E.M.

CONTACT US

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