



Growing Old Is Not for Sissies

By Timi Gustafson, R.D.
December 8, 2011

According to the Census Bureau's latest report, there were 40.3 million people age 65 and older living in America in 2010, an increase of about 15 percent from a decade ago. By contrast, the entire U.S. population grew by only 9.7 percent during the same time period. For the first time in history, the elderly are now the fastest growing demographic group in the country.

In 1900, Americans could expect to live for about 49 years. In 2000, the average life expectancy had expanded to almost 77 years. Over the 20th century, people's average lifespan lengthened between 1.5 and 2.7 years – per decade.

We are not alone in this trend. Aging populations are a global phenomenon. "The world is changing as a result of mankind's greatest gift to itself, the engineering of longer lives," writes Ted C. Fishman, author of "Shock of Grey." In fact, if one adds up all the extra years of today's average human life expectancy and multiplies it by the current world population, the magnitude of this development becomes even more apparent. The seven billion people now living on earth will enjoy more than 250 billion extra years compared to our ancestors of just one hundred years ago.

Obviously, it is debatable whether this dramatic rise in human life expectancy should be considered a success story or cause for concern. While the world population continues to grow, space and resources diminish. Increases in birth rates and longevity burn the candle at both ends. As Fishman puts it, "Billions of extra human-years would seem to virtually require a second planet."

Not everyone predicts a doomsday scenario, however. Some see the graying of America as an opportunity to rethink our youth-obsessed culture and come up with workable alternatives. "As baby boomers move into the next stage of life, [they] now have the opportunity to experience a mold-shattering period of reinvention and personal growth, career, liberation, nourishing relationships and financial freedom," writes Ken Dychtwald, bestselling author of "The Power Years – A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life."

Instead of drifting off into the twilight, Dychtwald encourages his readers to use their golden years for having fun and being creative. Like any other part of our lives, he suggests, we can reinvent retirement and turn it into yet another adventure.

There is also lots of spiritual advice how to cope with the many challenges of aging. Self-help guru Deepak Chopra, MD recommends a new perception of old age by applying "techniques for harnessing the power of awareness [...] to experience timelessness. By intervening at the level

where belief becomes biology, we can achieve our unbounded potential,” he writes in his bestselling book, “Ageless Body, Timeless Mind – The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old.”

Views like these are particularly popular among baby boomers who are physically fit and financially secure, but they don’t necessarily apply to the majority of today’s seniors, according to Susan Jacoby, author of “Never Say Die – The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age.” “The idea that there is a new kind of old age, experiences in a radically different way from old age throughout history, is integral to the marketing of longevity. The idea that we can control the future by aggressively focusing on and taking care of ourselves is an article of faith for baby boomers,” she writes.

Whether it turns out to be another adventure or pure fantasy, increasing longevity challenges the baby boomers in different ways than any other generation before them. They must come up with visions and concepts of what their added years will mean to them. Taking up the proverbial “rocking chair” is neither an attractive nor, in most cases, a realistic option.

What is now called “active retirement” can entail many things, such as a career change, part-time work, hobbies, travel, a new relationship or even marriage. But most of all, it means staying physically and mentally as healthy as possible for as long as possible. Striving for optimal health is a task of a lifetime, but it becomes absolutely crucial as we grow older, according to Andrew Weil, MD, author of “Healthy Aging – A Lifelong Guide to Your Physical and Spiritual Well-being.” He writes, “Although aging is an irreversible process, there are myriad things we can do to keep our minds and bodies in good working order through all phases of life.”

In other words, the way we age comes down to the efforts we make on behalf of our well-being. All the experts quoted above agree on one thing: Healthy aging takes work, hard work.

“Growing Old Is Not for Sissies,” is the title of a book by Etta Clark, a photographer, in which she presents portraits of senior athletes. Some are astonishing overachievers, regardless of their age; others just keep doing what they have always enjoyed with no particular goal other than remaining active. They all are an inspiration, in their deeds as well as their wisdom. It was the author’s own mother who first gave her the idea for her book. She quotes her saying: “Age – who cares? The years belong to someone else. I’m interested in living.”

Timi Gustafson, R.D. is a clinical dietitian and author of the book “The Healthy Diner – How to Eat Right and Still Have Fun”®, which is available on her blog, “Food and Health with Timi Gustafson R.D.” (<http://www.timigustafson.com>), and at amazon.com. You can follow Timi on [Twitter](#) and on [Facebook](#). This article can be found at <http://blog.seattlepi.com/timigustafsonrd/2011/12/08/growing-old-is-not-for-sissies/>.