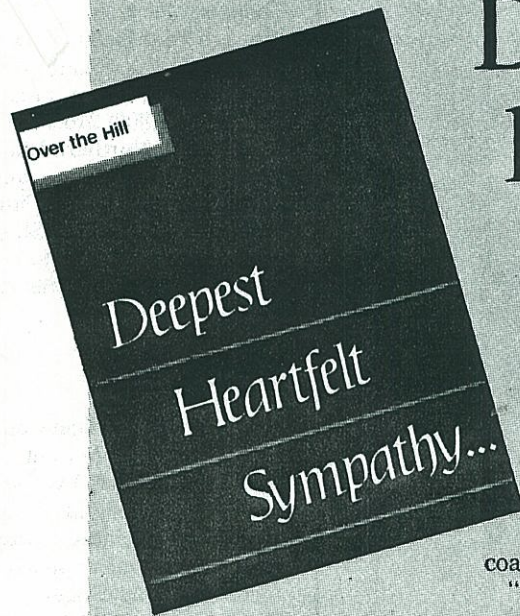


From: The Providence Sunday Journal, Health and Fitness Monthly, September 24, 2000, pages M1, M11.



# Dispelling old myth key to feeling young

By VICTORIA L. WILCOX  
Special to The Journal

A picture of a tombstone arrived in my mailbox. With it came a black greeting card expressing "deepest heartfelt sympathy." The card called me "over the hill" — on my 30th birthday.

Birthday cards illustrate how our culture views aging. The card companies tell us "old" means tying a string around your finger to remind yourself to breathe. They declare you old when your arms out-jiggle Jell-O. They liken birthdays to cookies: recalling how many you've had makes you ill.

While some cards portray seniors enriched by experience, most depict them as sedentary, senile, barely functional, and miserable.

The stereotypes lag behind the times, according to psychologist Robert L. Kahn, coauthor of the book *Successful Aging*.

"Older people have decades, on average, of vigorous life and potential contributions to

Turn to **OLD**, Page M-11

# Old

*Continued from Page M-1*

society beyond formal retirement," he says.

Pawtucket resident Shirley Kaiser, acting president of the Gray Panthers of Rhode Island, exemplifies the "new" old. She says, "I just turned 70, and I feel like I'm healthier than I was in my twenties because I am more active."

She may find still brighter days ahead: In a recent Harris Interactive poll, 44 percent of those in their 70s said they were having the best time of their lives.

While, in general, long-term illness and disability afflict old-timers more than youngsters, people scapegoat aging for losses wrought by disease, injury, and behavior, such as eating too much or the wrong food, exercising bodies and brains too little, smoking, and drinking too much alcohol. Don't expect grandma's DNA to save you: Genes account for only about a third of physical vigor in late life.

Dr. Robert N. Butler, founding director of the National Institute on Aging and president of the New York-based International Longevity Center, warns that equating "old" with "decrepit" can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, elders who blame their disabilities on aging die sooner than those who cite other causes.

Evidence that our youth-oriented society saps elderly people's will to live comes from a just-published study by Becca Levy, assistant professor of epidemiology and public health at Yale University, and her colleagues.

Subjects saw words that evoked pleasant or unpleasant images of old age flashed on a computer screen.

(The words, such as "sage" or "senile," appeared too briefly for conscious awareness.) Asked to imagine that they faced a life-threatening illness, subjects then answered questions about whether they would pursue life-saving treatment.

Elderly people exposed to negative stereotypes tended to decline treatment, while those exposed to positive stereotypes tended to accept it.

Misreading disease symptoms as a normal part of aging can court disaster. For example, consider the case of W.D. Scott of Bella Vista, Ark., who answered a query on the Internet. Scott, 74, said he suffered shortness of breath, which he said he "knew was because I was older and a little overweight."

He saw his doctor only after his "worry wart" daughter made an appointment for him. His doctor sent him to a cardiologist, who asked, "Where would you like to have surgery this afternoon?" An arteriogram revealed arteries with near-total blockages that could have killed him.

Robert J. Schreiber, medical director of geriatric services at Lahey Clinic in Burlington, Mass., says it's common for older people to mistake certain symptoms as a normal part of aging. Among them, he lists urinary incontinence, memory loss, shortness of breath, fatigue, and weakness.

Compounding the problem, he says, is that many elderly people feel unimportant and hesitate to bother the doctor with their concerns. He stresses that the longer they wait, the greater the chance of permanent harm. Research suggests that prejudice against older people can tax the body.

In another study led by Levy, seniors shown words linked to derogatory

stereotypes had greater blood pressure and heart rate responses to stress than those shown positive words. This means that repeatedly facing messages that bad mouth aging could bring on cardiovascular disease.

Age-based bias could also trigger memory loss, studies show. Fortunately, positive stereotypes promise to not only revive memory, but also to boost walking speed as much as weeks of participation in an exercise program.

To a large extent, our thoughts and behavior shape how we age. But, with ageism permeating our culture, how can you immunize yourself against it?

■ Discuss your health concerns, including those you expect at your age, with a health-care provider.

Schreiber says, "If you think it's due to aging, guess what? It's probably not."

■ Consider seeing a geriatrician, or ask friends to recommend a doctor attuned to older people.

If a doctor dismisses your concerns with comments like, "You're not getting any younger," Butler suggests saying, "Doctor, I don't think that's appropriate." Either ask the doctor to investigate your symptoms or get another opinion.

■ Remember, healthy habits can better your health, no matter what your age.

"It's never too late to change lifestyle," Schreiber says. For instance, nearly everyone, even nursing home residents, can benefit from weightlifting and other forms of exercise.

■ Know that retiring from your job need not mean retiring from life.

Butler touts the health-giving benefits of staying involved in meaning-

ful activities. Work for a political cause, play with your grandchildren, or go back to school. Stay in touch with people. Challenge your mind.

■ Question the stereotypes.

"We've heard, for many years, 'act your age,' and people, when they turn 65, sit back in rocking chairs and let life go by them," Kaiser says.

But she doesn't let attitudes or arthritis sideline her. "Most of my friends are like me; they get out and do things," she says. "We're really enjoying the golden years."

*Victoria L. Wilcox, who has a Ph.D. in medical psychology, lives in Smithfield.*