



e-quilibrium

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Age Cues

“Age management” is a multi billion dollar industry. The desire to hide, slow, stop, or reverse aging motivates people to spend lots of money on anti-aging products or programs. Physiologic aging is, of course, ultimately inevitable, although behavioral factors such as diet, sleep, and exercise can certainly affect both the pace of this process and the visible evidence of aging.

Surely the economy benefits from consumers’ search for products that are purported to manage aging, but it could be that looking inward is a more effective way to impact aging. For example, having positive attitudes toward aging (which run counter to the prevailing negative stereotypes about aging) has been found to be associated with living up to seven years longer.

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer has studied how environmental cues related to aging affect health and longevity. She and her colleagues have found that workers who wear uniforms have better health than those who don’t wear uniforms (but have comparable earnings), ostensibly because clothing typically reflects age to some degree. Women who have children at an older age have longer life expectancies, perhaps in part because of their interaction with the younger parents of their children’s peers. Similarly, among couples with large age differences, younger spouses are found to live shorter lives while older spouses tend to live longer.

Perhaps the most fascinating studies that Langer has conducted have been dubbed the “counterclockwise” studies.

The first of these was conducted in 1981. A small group of men in their 70s spent five days at a converted monastery, made to appear as if it were 1959. Environmental cues in the facility, including magazines and black and white television sets, were what would have been found in 1959. The men were instructed to behave as if it were actually 1959, and to be the person they had been 22 years before. No mirrors were present so that a participant could not see himself. Compared to measures taken prior to this experiment, at the conclusion of the five days the men were found to be stronger and more flexible, have sensory improvements (such as hearing and vision), and have improved memory. Objective observers, unaware of the purpose of the study, found that the men appeared younger in photos taken at the end of the week compared to photos taken before the study began.

In 2010, the BBC replicated this study for a documentary, with Langer as a consultant. The results were remarkably similar to what was found in the 1981 study. Langer and her colleagues plan an even bolder study in 2015, in which women with Stage 4 breast cancer will live for a week as if it were 2003, long before their cancer was diagnosed. In addition to measuring pain levels, mood, and energy, the investigators will examine tumor size and other indices of cancer status.

Langer raises the question of why the term “developing” isn’t used throughout the lifespan, rather than just for the first few decades of life. For example, instead of looking at aging-related changes as loss or decay, an alternative perspective is to see physiologic changes as opportunities to develop new skills or pathways. An artist with less dexterity in her hands might develop the skill of doing drawings that are more abstract rather than detailed.

Living by the expectation that one should “act your age” can be a disservice as we age, because the stereotypes associated with getting older in Western cultures tend to be negative. This certainly isn’t the case in all cultures.

Langer’s work doesn’t suggest that aging is something to deny or be ashamed of, but rather that many of the norms and environmental cues that have come to be associated with getting older are inaccurate and unhealthy. Chronological age and attendant stereotypes need not preclude one’s ability to be

fully engaged in life and involved in activities that are conducive to enduring health and wellbeing.

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