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Weathering the Years
Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
James E. Birren, Ph. D.
August 1976
4 pages

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Stress and the Family

5. *Weathering the Years*

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

BY JAMES E. BIRREN, Ph.D.

Our fears about aging are relected in the jokes we tell. Many are directed at middle-aged women. "Middle age is when a woman's youth changes from present tense to pretense." "Thirty doesn't tell on a woman. Her best friends do." It would be good if we could laugh away the stresses of aging.

A woman said to me the other day, "I used to think old people were funny. Then one day I looked at myself in the mirror and I couldn't laugh any more. I began to look for a beauty that was more than skin deep. I think maturity puts things into perspective. I have more past experiences to draw upon now."

One middle-aged man tells how his father's way of coping with stress has influenced his own life. "My father was a real dynamo. Even when he was 74, I had a hard time keeping up with him. I couldn't walk as fast as he could. Then he had a slight stroke and became an old man. My father didn't have a program that could help him accept the changes. I feel that because I have seen this happen to him, I'm ready for age. I have a plan for my life. There are many things I want to do. I want to grow old gracefully."

Do you have a plan for your life? Do you have strategies ready to help you cope with the stresses that come in the later years?

Actually, aging is a privilege. Many of our parents' generation died in childbirth, or in their working years of infectious diseases such as pneumonia. Aging is a gift of the 20th century to people who can learn to manage it and exploit it for what it can be.

One way to look at the events that happen as you grow up and grow old is to think of them as developmental tasks. At characteristic times in your life, typical events happen. Adolescents have identity crises. Young adults have stress and uncertainty about what marriage partners and careers to choose. Adults have children to raise, mortgage payments to make and older

parents to look after. Older adults have children to launch, retirement to face, grief to overcome, illness and death to accept.

If you successfully complete those developmental tasks you can go on, as it were, to the next square in the life game.

Developmental tasks are the "life crises" or the stressful life experiences that ask us to change and grow in wisdom and maturity. Change and stress both seem to pile up together in later life. With age, change usually seems to be in the direction of loss, not gain. Not only do you slow down, but losses in health, body energy and vigor generally occur with age.

Youthful beauty is lost, the result of changes in physical appearance. Male-female distinctions seem to be lost. Family togetherness, or at least the appearance of it, is lost as children move away from home. Retirement not only means the loss of job, and of considerable income and financial security, but also means the loss of important social relationships and friendships. The death of a spouse may be a greater loss than the prospect of one's own death. "With Ray gone, there's nothing left to live for."

There are other debits. What about the little losses? Our memories no longer tell us as accurately as before what we went to the market for.

What about the big ones that challenge our feelings about who we are? What about arising from a bed in which one has been impotent or frigid? Some changes in physical appearance, vigor and sexual performance are to be expected with age. Those changes, however, become problems only if you feel it is extremely important to be pretty, powerful or potent.

As long as you are alive you will face developmental tasks and change which will stress your body, your emotions and your mind. Although you can't escape this fate, can you learn to age better and more gracefully? Some people are content and happy to grow old.

Are active or passive people more content in later life? It's harder to be active with age. Older people have fewer social contacts and opportunities for gathering together with others. Would you, as you age, be happier by being active? Exercise, even just walking, is good for health and healthier people are happier.

Our culture tells us that the active life is the best.

One social theory of aging, called "activity theory," says that the person who ages successfully is the one who stays active. He finds new activities to replace those he outgrows or is forced to give up.

In contrast to this, the "disengagement theory" of aging has been proposed. It says the aging process is a mutually satisfying and inevitable "disengaging" of the individual and society. By doing only essential things and by eliminating nonessential ones, the individual can deal with the loss of energy and role that age brings.

Which is best, "active" or "disengaged"?

Actually, that depends on what kind of person you are. Your personality, the way you face life and react to day-to-day events, will influence the way you face the stress of aging.

One kind of individual who seems to age very well is the "mature," or integrated, type of person. He or she remains actively involved in the world and reacts to life and to aging as it comes. The mature person does not try to classify events as black or white, good or bad, but accepts uncertainty and is willing to work for compromise.

There are different styles for meeting the stresses of aging successfully. Often one sees the "rocking chair" or passive type of person who sits back, letting life happen as it may. This person can be as satisfied with life as the more active, "mature" type.

Another kind of person, the "self-hater," is the one who continually blames himself. He or she ages less well than either the "mature" or "rocking chair" type. Self-haters punish themselves unmercifully. "If I had only been smarter, I would have made that land investment 10 years ago." "If I had only been more clever, I would have married a better man." To cope with the stresses of aging, it would help to get rid of self-blame and be able to accept yourself just as you are.

Another kind of person who does not handle the tasks of aging well is the "angry" one who always blames others. He or she hates everyone and everything. "If the boss had been smarter, he would have appreciated my worth." "If my wife had not spent all my money, I would be comfortable today." "If my husband had not been such a drinker, my life would have been happy." "If the politicians were not so bad, things would be much better for me now." Blaming others is as poor a way to cope with the stresses of aging as blaming oneself.

Both the "self-hater" and the "angry" ones are refusing to take responsibility for their own lives. If you hate and blame other people enough, then you are relieved of the responsibility for taking care of yourself. If you hate

yourself enough you can paint yourself into a corner of depression and you have no real responsibility to fight your way out of it.

In middle age, a common situation of the working person is that he or she has too much to do and not enough time to do everything. He or she is experiencing "overload." While we usually think of the younger person as caught in an overload situation (as in studying for an examination), it is the middle-aged person who typically gets caught in the cross fire of many competing decisions.

Successful middle-aged people seem to know when to pull back. They have learned the signs that tell them when they are in over their heads: the headache; the inability to sleep well; nothing looks good to eat, or everything does; every little thing is irritating.

How do you cool yourself off when you are faced with middle-age overload? "I try to tread water for a few days and catch my breath." "I find I can't get as angry as I used to; it takes too much out of me." "I cool myself down by accepting the fact that other people around me have to do their own learning and make their own mistakes." "I stand back and simply don't let my insides get as involved as they used to."

One of the statements made most often by middle-aged and older adults is that they have less energy than before. "When I was young, there was nothing I felt I couldn't do. Now I run out of steam during the day." One of the important strategies of growing older is to conserve energy. "I save myself for the big things" is the way one man put it.

Another strategy used by people who cope successfully with stress is to develop a network of friends or professional colleagues whose judgment they trust and whom they can count on to help in times of trouble.

Also, to endure the stresses of aging better, it helps to have at least one close friend to share the details of your life. The older you are, the harder it may be to have a network of friends and the more you will probably need the support of a single confidant. This other person does not have to be your mate and it does not appear to matter too much whether the friend is of the same or the opposite sex. There will be an emotional cushioning if you have someone you can lean on in time of crisis or stress. Even the death of one's spouse is weathered better and the horrendous gap following death is more rapidly closed if you have a confidant.

A sense of self-confidence and competence, an "I know I can handle it" attitude, also seems to be an important aspect of the aging strategy. One successful elderly businessman said, "I am much more capable today than I was at 45, and it's because the learning process is a continuing one." The more self-confident you feel about yourself, the more likely you are to cope successfully with stressful situations that arise. If you expect to be able to cope with stress, you are a long way toward being able to.

Hope—optimism—may also help you mobilize your energies and increase your effectiveness in reacting to stress. In one hospital study, patients who were given hope, in contrast to those who were not, reported a greater relief of their symptoms, less anxiety and less depression.

If you can anticipate future crises and stress, the harshness of their impact on your life can be reduced. Whether you are anticipating retirement or a new occupation, divorce or remarriage, open-heart surgery or a face-lift, children's going away or parents' coming to stay, plan for it. Make up your mind to handle it. Maybe you can find out about these changes from friends or others who have had experience with the stressful situation you are soon to face.

In summary, then, the stresses of aging are seen as the normal developmental tasks that you face as you grow up and grow old. Your personality and the various coping strategies you use can help you deal with the stresses. Some of the personality styles and coping strategies which seem to be more successful in helping others cope with their stress have been mentioned: Which ones do you think can work best for you?

If your strategies are not working, change them. Remember the word strategy comes from "Strategos," the name of the Greek general in charge of strategies. You are the general in charge of your own life. What are your strategies? A good general always has alternative plans if the present ones are not working.

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Adapted by David R. Imig, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist, Michigan State University

Michigan State University Printing

