



Your Story
MATTERS

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Columnist

Aging gracefully in an anti-aging world

The undertaking of aging gracefully is a lot to ask for in a society that fights so hard against what is unavoidable. As a millennial myself, I may be a bit removed from the post-65 generation defined as “senior citizens,” yet I find myself already critiquing my emerging laugh lines, scavenging for the arrival of gray hairs, and recently spent far more than I care to admit on a “magic” (per the sales associate) brew for my face promising to ward off the inevitable.

We frequently go to extremes to seek out the elusive fountain of youth. We go under the knife to stretch, contort, and implant our bodies, purchase supplements touted on late-night infomercials with promises too good to be true, douse ourselves with the latest and greatest potions to erase our wrinkles or restore our hairlines, and spend our hard-earned money in all sorts of ways in hopes that we can maintain a version of youthfulness. The pressure to partake in the massive and manipulative multi-billion-dollar anti-aging industry is especially understandable in our society that frankly, is pretty pitiful when it comes to honoring the relevance and value of our older generations.

Ultimately, it boils down to holding onto respect, being seen, and being acknowledged.

This quest for youth can all be a bit exhausting and ultimately when despite our best efforts, our body, our appearance, and our abilities inevitably change, it can be

difficult to maintain a sense of optimism. Furthermore, as the aging process continues, a person may feel their world shrinking as family and friends may move or pass away, mobility declines, and recognition previously gained in the workplace may lessen. Finding connection and combatting feelings of isolation and loneliness can be insidious and a huge contributor to depression, anxiety, and fear.

Adults aged 85 and older have the highest suicide rates nationwide, while those aged 75-84 have the second highest.

Convincing older adults who may have grown up with considerable stigma around the subject that their mental health is important can be an obstacle on its own. Older adults may fear judgment and/or that their independence may be jeopardized. Additionally, our healthcare system needs to work harder on dismantling the notion that depression and anxiety are “normal” in aging populations, which further dissuades aging adults from seeking help and may prevent the implementation of potentially effective treatment strategies. It is thought that up to 50 percent of cases of major depression go undiagnosed in older populations — often attributed to the “aging process” or also commonly, dementia.

Specialist care is hard to come by and let’s not forget the issues of Medicare, poor reimbursement for mental-health care, and the red tape that discourages too many providers from even accepting Medicare. I could rant about this on its own — another soapbox for another time, perhaps. The numbers of geriatricians or physicians trained specifically in caring for aging populations falls far short of the demand. There are fewer than 7,000 geriatricians nationwide — a significant shortage when considering the demand of the 14-million older adults living today. Ideally, there would be 20,000 or more geriatric providers assuming each provider carried a panel of 700 patients. And so, finding providers that appreciate physical and psychological complexities, potential drug interactions, and psychosocial needs can be very difficult.

While the obstacles and warped social ideals of aging

deserve mention, there can also be much to gain and much joy to be had. Many older adults enjoy freedoms with their time and resources that may not have been present before. For some, it can be a chance to pursue hobbies, seek new social connections, travel, and grow in self-discovery. While perceived feelings of being insignificant can come with grief, it can

also be a kind of liberation as it allows an opportunity to shed inhibitions and insecurities of being so consumed with the opinions of others.

As a society and certainly for millennials like myself, we need to take pause and rethink how we navigate our own aging journey and also honor generations preceding us. We need to recognize how such fears of aging and, yes,

death contribute to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and despair. In our relentless fight to stop aging, we can lose out on the wisdom, value, and growth aging can offer and discredit the significance of the older adults that paved the way for us.

As Betty Friedan so eloquently voices, “Aging is not lost youth, but a new stage of opportunity and strength.”



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