

January “Senior Sense”: Want To Enjoy Old Age? This 90-Year-Old Has One Simple Trick, And Science Backs Her Up

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As Bette Davis famously quipped, “Old age ain’t no place for sissies.” My mother knows this all too well. In a couple of months, she’ll turn 90—making her part of one of the fastest-growing demographics in America. She lives independently in a retirement community and keeps busy going to cultural events and seeing friends who range in age from 70 to 104. But she has not been spared the slings and arrows of aging. She lost her life partner, my father, to dementia five years ago. She broke her femur *twice* and was homebound in a wheelchair for seven long months. And yet despite all these losses and setbacks she seems more positive and more sanguine than she has ever been in her life.

The reason? One word: Gratitude. In short, my mom seems to have more of it than she ever did before. It’s a word we hear a lot this time of year, as we re-connect with our loved ones and celebrate our shared connections. But the act of giving thanks — of being profoundly grateful for life’s blessings — isn’t just about tradition: Science says it’s good for us too. A growing body of [research](#) finds that gratitude can have a lasting impact on health. It can boost the immune system, improve sleep and combat the negative effects of stress. When we think about what we appreciate, our body responds by increasing oxytocin, the feel-good hormone.

I wanted to find out why my mom seems so grateful now, and whether there’s a lesson for the rest of us. So I called her to get her perspective. “I never imagined I would live this long,” my mom told me. “I have much to be grateful for, despite my increasing loss of energy and mobility. I depend on a cane and a walker and my memory shows continual signs of aging. But I am most grateful I can engage in activities that are sources of meaning, pleasure and joy. I meet regularly with old friends but most of all I am grateful for my wonderful family.” My mother doesn’t shy away from the fact there are many aspects of aging which are undeniably hard. The loss of functioning and the grim reaper looms large. But a supportive community brings the vital gift of connection, while loneliness and social isolation pose major [health risks](#) for older adults.

Yet despite all the hardships, the ability to experience gratitude and remain connected as we age can lead to a more positive sense of well-being. “I understand myself and others in ways I would not have been able to when I was younger” my mother says. “Perhaps that’s because I’ve learned what nourishes me is deep and meaningful connection. I am also able to reflect on my limitations and be less prone to guilt and shame. I know that at any moment my life can change drastically. And at times I do go to dark places. But I have learned not to stay there. I understand that adapting to loss can be a major source of strength and growth. Every day I try to balance whatever has been difficult with whatever I have been able to accomplish.”

What can we do to encourage gratitude and achieve a better outlook? My mom understands that you don’t have to negate the bad stuff to focus on the good things in life. Recognize positive events each day and engage in small acts of kindness. Connect with nature and take time to notice the simple beauty that surrounds you. Learn how to interrupt a cycle of negative thoughts by slowing down and focusing on your breath. Some people write gratitude letters or keep a journal, as a way to bring this practice into day-to-day life. You might be thinking your cranky father or pessimistic mother won’t ever sign up for that. Maybe not, but bear in mind, positive feelings aren’t just a reflection of a sunny personality: They can be learned. There are even [classes](#) on the science of happiness that teach seniors how to enhance their life satisfaction by practicing—you guessed it—gratitude.

As my mother has shown, older adults have the capacity for greater perspective and a deeper wisdom about themselves and others. Yet as a youth-centric culture, we focus more on what is lost as we age and not so much on what is gained. My mother’s ability to grow and learn as she approaches 90 has made me less fearful of my own aging. She is willing to accept help just so long as no one calls her “Sweetie” or “Honey.” She is more in touch with what she calls her “sassy-self” and speaks her mind in no uncertain terms. With any luck, in 30 years I’ll be fortunate enough to turn 90 and face life’s ups and downs with the same grace, humor and equanimity. I hope that I too can balance the losses that are sure to come with a sense of gratitude for all I have gained.

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