

Getting over getting older

Focuses on the changing attitude towards aging. Baby boomers as victims of the anti-aging epidemic; Reason behind the fear of aging; Positive changes that come with aging; How older people may improve their lives.

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Forget about trying to reverse the process. It's never been a better time to face up to aging. In fact, getting older truly does mean getting better.

Baby boomers: We were supposed to be the generation that turned aging into a bedroom act, making it sexy to grow old and gray, and get laugh lines. If 76 million of us wrinkled into middle age with style and verve, well, wow, the entire Western World might rethink the need to search for a fountain of youth. Most of us, however, don't seem to have found that sense of contentment with our aging bodies that we expected to. Instead, baby boomers have both masterminded--and fallen victim to--an anti-aging epidemic far more virulent than the average case of mass hysteria. It isn't simply that we're trying to exercise and eat our way to longer, healthier lives. Sales are up dramatically across the gamut of age-fighting weaponry, from wrinkle creams to collagen injections to cosmetic surgery. Nor are the warriors only women. According to a recent Roper Starch Worldwide survey, six percent of men nationwide actually use such traditionally feminine products as bronzers and foundation to create the illusion of a more youthful appearance.

What is it about aging that makes our sagging skin crawl? Are we frightened of looking and feeling old because it reminds us that we're mortal? That we might become infirm? What, in fact, does older age bring and how will it be different for us boomers than for the generations that came before?

The first surprise is that those of us entering the middle years en masse are truly lucky to be hitting our thirties, forties, and fifties now, in the 1990s. Because the state of a civilization has a very real impact on the inevitable path to getting older, every generation experiences aging differently. According to aging expert Helen Kivnick, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Minnesota, the experience of later life is determined partly by biology, partly by history, and partly by society and culture. Never before in history has the phase of later life had the potential to be so long and fruitful. "Old age as we now know it is very new, and doesn't look at all like it used to," Kivnick says. "Because people live longer and with greater independence, they can plan their futures more actively. Elders today [those over 65] are breaking new ground."

OLD AINT WHAT IT USED TO BE

If those who are old today are stepping onto untrodden ground, we boomers are about to create a stampede. And chances are we'll be extremely skilled at making old age into an interesting and fruitful time of life. We know how to explore and plumb possibility. We have already been enjoying far fewer societal constraints in our middle years than has ever previously been the norm. Renee Garfinkel, Ph.D., a psychologist and aging expert from Silver Springs, Maryland, says across the board we have fewer age-based limitations to hinder us. "It's not simply that we tend to keep our health longer; it's that we also aren't subject to generational restrictions on behavior, career choices, or clothing." If you decide to

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