

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU AGE

Growing old in America is rapidly becoming a very common experience. Today, 1 out of 9 people in the United States is 65 or older, and the fastest growing age group is people age 85 and older.

For many, aging is a positive, fulfilling experience; there is no limit to the human ability to grow, develop, and learn. Older people use their lifetime of experiences and learning for their own benefit and, often, for the benefit of others.

Too often aging stereotypes are negative, and picture the older individual as ill and/or unproductive. Many of these stereotypes are perpetuated by myths rather than by actual facts and, once the myths are dispelled, the reality is that the aging experience can be an asset and source of strength.

Certainly, it is true that there are changes and losses which occur with aging. This chapter is designed to give you the facts about those changes and, at the same time, dispel some of the negative stereotypes about aging.

CHANGES & LOSSES THAT CAN OCCUR WHEN WE AGE

As we age, we experience many losses and changes. Some of these losses are physical in nature. Others are social, such as the death of a spouse. Elderly in their 80's often cope with the following age-related changes, losses and problems:

- ◆ Major changes in sight, touch, hearing and taste
- ◆ Reduced ability to move from place to place
- ◆ Frailty
- ◆ Two or more chronic health problems
- ◆ Greater likelihood that they cannot live alone and must move from their lifelong home
- ◆ Scaling down or loss of personal belongings
- ◆ Loss of friends, family, or pets by moving or death

SENSORY CHANGES

Sensory changes affect our quality of life as well as our functional abilities. This is because we enjoy, understand and stay in touch with our world through our senses. Sensory changes usually become more of a problem after age 65. They add to other general losses and can affect older people's quality of life and self-esteem in a number of ways. Sensory changes and losses:

- ◆ Reduce the ability to communicate and relate to others. Social isolation is a common problem.
- ◆ Decrease the freedom and ability to move about and to be involved in meaningful activities.
- ◆ Reduce self-confidence and independence as the need to depend on others increases.
- ◆ Deceive elderly about what they see and hear. They might misunderstand conversations or situations and respond with fear, anger, or suspicion. We may label them confused or senile.
- ◆ Reduce enjoyable activities such as eating and entertainment pastimes.

TYPES OF SENSORY CHANGES:

- ◆ **VISION** Vision loss begins in the 40's and is more common among women than men. Glare becomes a greater problem as the eye may lose some ability to adjust to light. Night vision also decreases as does the ability to distinguish colors. The eye's lens becomes increasingly opaque. By the age of 60 only about 1/3 as much light enters the retina. Cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration are not a normal part of aging, but are experienced by many elderly. One half of all severe visual impairments in America are found among those aged 65 or older.

- ◆ **TOUCH AND PAIN SENSITIVITY** Touching and being touched is a powerful source of communication and pleasure. Petting a furry kitten, feeling a refreshing breeze or being held and hugged makes us feel accepted, loved, satisfied, alive, relaxed, comfortable and close to others.

Some experts believe the sense of touch remains unchanged with age; others disagree. We do know that arthritis, stroke and other conditions reduce touch sensation. Some experts believe that sensory nerves that receive touch/pain messages need stronger messages or stimuli before elderly respond to them.

- ◆ **CHANGES IN HEARING** People who are hard of hearing are often unable to enjoy pleasurable activities such as listening to music, birds, singing, socializing on the telephone and participating in group activities. They may misunderstand conversations and situations; they may feel people are talking about them or laughing at their mistakes.

A hearing impairment can have a more serious impact on our lives than being visually impaired. Hearing loss greatly affects one's ability to communicate and relate to others. It tends to cause greater social isolation than blindness. Feelings of embarrassment, defeat, frustration, anxiety, and anger are common among persons who are hard of hearing.

The most common hearing change for older people is called **presbycusis**. This is a progressive, irreversible decline in the ability to hear high frequency sounds. High frequency loss affects the ability to hear the soft consonants in speech such as ch, sh, x, z, f, and p. The long vowel sounds are usually easily heard.

There is a **loss in volume or loudness** with age. It's hard to hear in noisy surroundings. Soft background music that you normally don't notice can interfere with an older person's hearing.

- ◆ **CHANGES IN TASTE** A number of factors affect the ability to taste. First, the number of taste buds decreases with age. Most people over the age of 65 have lost 50% of their taste buds. Individuals in their late 70's may have only one-sixth remaining taste buds. Sugar and salt sensitive taste buds are affected earliest. Second, the affects of lifestyle add to age-related changes. Smoking, poor oral hygiene and trauma, such as burning the tongue, add to age-related losses in taste sensitivity. Third, the presence of dentures reduces the ability to taste.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Changes in health and physical appearance are an inevitable part of aging. Although the majority of seniors continue to lead active and independent lives, many seniors face some form of chronic illness which results in lessened resiliency and loss of strength. Muscles lose mass, skin sags and lose elasticity; wrinkles appear and height slightly diminishes. Other skeletomuscular changes may

result in stooping, increased stiffness and loss of mobility. Age spots may appear, hair turns gray and the jaw structure may noticeably change. Metabolic changes affect the body's ability to regulate itself. The biological process gradually slows down, though at different rates of speed for different people.

Illness has often been thought to be synonymous with aging. While it is true that chronic illnesses are more common with advancing age, aging is not the cause. We age because our cells are programmed to age. **Old doesn't mean ill.** Heredity, the environment, personal lifestyles, injury and disease affect the aging process.

MENTAL CHANGES

When we consider mental changes, we must look at the impact of all sensory, physical and social losses on the older person. The accumulation of losses means that some elders are at high risk of developing mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, obsessive concern about health, and mild paranoia. The symptoms of depression can mimic a dementing illness such as Alzheimer's disease, and profound sadness can be mistaken for memory loss. Other symptoms may be caused by the effects of complex medical problems, multiple medications or the use and abuse of alcohol or other chemical addiction. Often, memory loss in an older person can be corrected. For example, if the person has a minor head injury, fluid imbalance, a high fever, poor nutrition, or has suffered an adverse drug reaction, correction of the problem can reverse the memory loss. Changes in cognitive ability should be assessed by a qualified health care professional.

Normal forgetfulness does increase with advancing age, but does not automatically progress to dementia. Simple forgetfulness is not the same as memory loss. Being forgetful is the problem of not being able to recall information when it is needed. Memory loss is not being aware that you have any knowledge of the subject. There are some normal changes that affect learning, thinking and behavior in the aging individual. These include:

- ◆ Organizing and remembering new information becomes difficult for the very old. Well-learned skills and routines are usually unaffected.
- ◆ There is a decrease in mental flexibility. It takes longer to change to a new train of thought, to become familiar with new situations, and to follow instructions. These difficulties increase when the older person feels stressed.
- ◆ There is a drift toward more concrete thinking and less abstract, creative thought. The old-old or the very frail person may appear to have flattened emotions; they appear not to care as much about events, situations, and even people close to them.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relations with family members, particularly the spouse, can undergo changes and/or strain during retirement years. When they retire and their pace slows, retirees often find themselves face-to-face with family problems that have been long ignored or avoided by work or child-rearing.

SUMMARY

People over 65 are a diverse group—no one description can tell you what they are like. The cumulative effect of years of individual experiences makes people more different, rather than more alike, in later life.

Your attitudes toward aging will affect how you age and how you respond to older people. In sum, in spite of the inevitability of aging, it is entirely possible to remain mentally and physically healthy throughout life. Exercise, both mental and physical, is important.