

Forever 21



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Forever 21: Dealing with America's Fear of Aging and Death Abstract It is estimated by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention that there will be 71 million U. S. adults over the aged of 65 by 2030 (CDC, 2011, May 11). It can be certain, as was with their predecessors, that the geriatric journey for these adults will be filled with multiple anti-aging face creams and miracle hair growth products as they reluctantly cross over to the last stage of their lives.

As shown not only through our media and social interactions' growing old is not the popular choice. Ironically, the reality is that aging and dying is just as significant as our first breath. It is a journey made by everyone and everything though it is fought with a resistance that cannot be denied. The basis of this paper will discuss the preconceptions and barriers, whether psychological or societal, that is linked with aging, and steadfast approaches that can be used to cope with the aging process and the reality that death is eminent.

Keywords: ageism, aging, death, coping, geriatric, fear, quality of life Forever 21: Dealing with America's Fear of Aging and Death A study performed by the National Consumer's League reported that approximately 90 million Americans purchase anti-aging products or have surgical procedures performed to ward off the visible signs of aging each year (Nelson, 2005). As the baby boomer generation moves into their senior years, they may not be prepared for the psychological challenges that their predecessors experienced before them (Daniel, 1994).

As Todd Nelson describes in his article, Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Future Self, the old are treated as “ second-class citizens with nothing to

offer society” (Nelson, 2005, p. 209). A research model concluded that older persons in the United States were perceived as “ warm, but incompetent” (Nelson, 2005, p. 215). Research suggests that the stereotyping of the older population is much more severe than originally thought, making it necessary for further research to find ways to reduce the disdain towards aging (Nelson, 2005).

The negative attitude associated with aging has not always been this way. Historically, older individuals were once revered, and admired as they were considered wise and experienced. They were the historians of the past, teaching the customs and values to the new, emerging generations (Nelson, 2005). The degeneration towards the old occurred by way of technology through the invention of the printing press which allowed duplication of stories in mass distribution, making the elder’s status less significant.

Another factor was the industrial revolution as progress dictated where families lived. This new mobility requirement did not settle well with the less adaptive and older generation, breaking apart the traditional family structure in order to secure employment elsewhere. Growing companies needed strength and adaptability during that time so the younger generation excelled professionally whereas experienced, older applicants were less valued. The advancements in medicine also extended a person’s life expectancy, prolonging the caregiver’s responsibility to its elder (Nelson, 2005).

In Todd Nelson’s article, Ageism: Prejudice against Our Feared Future self, he discusses the social prejudices associated with aging, and the subtle ways

those prejudices are conveyed. His primary focus is our aging population of baby boomers, and how they will be affected by being stereotyped in ways that are patronizing and degrading (Nelson, 2005). In an effort to thwart such negative attitudes, Jere Daniel, the author of *Learning to Love Growing Old*, describes a “vanguard” movement that is committed to changing the way aging is perceived.

These individuals have evoked the term, “conscious aging” which promotes awareness and acceptance of the aging process as we move through each stage of life. The supporters of this movement confer that aging is not a curable disease, and it cannot be solved by spending billions of dollars on preventing its process or its end (Daniel, 1994). Another supporter of changing the way aging is conveyed is author, Margaret Cruiksbank, of the book, *Learning to be Old*. In her book she is a proponent of changing the way the aging process is described. Her position is that the underlying meaning of popular terms to describe aging weakens its value.

She denotes that the term “successful aging” is a false phrase for the elderly as it “masks both the wish to continue mid-life indefinitely and the white, Middle-class, Western values of researchers, causing them to emphasize productivity, effectiveness and independence” (Cruiksbank, 2009, p. 2). She also concludes that the term “productive” aging symbolizes “economic usefulness and social conformity” (Cruiksbank, 2009, p. 2), especially for the female gender. More importantly, these terms can be used to measure. This ability to measure is subjective to the questioner and an individual’s self-worth.

She suggests the term “aging comfortably” as it signifies easiness, and a “faint hint” of pleasurable self-indulgence which may not have been possible in younger years (Cruiksbank, 2009, p. 3). There has been decades of research examining what it referred to as “automatic categorization” (Nelson, 2005, p. 207). Researchers describe this as an essential trait in humans that is a primal response to physical characteristics, such as race, gender, and age, that automatically prompts emotional responses and prejudices. This type of categorization sets the foundation for stereotyping (Nelson, 2005).

The aging community is faced with an array of negative stereotypes that affects their independence as well as their self-perception. Many times the negativity is hidden, almost overlooked as it is in an unconscious gesture unbeknownst to either participant. Nelson discusses the use of patronizing language as a form of negative socialization. He states that researchers define its usage as “overaccommodation and baby talk” (Nelson, 2005, p. 209). This type of language is based on the stereotype that individuals suffer from hearing loss to a limited or degenerate intellect as a result of growing old (Nelson, 2005).

Another form of stereotyping that has a debilitating effect on the aging adult's self-esteem is a term called “infantilization” (Nelson, 2005, p. 210). This is described as a process that occurs over time as the aging adult relinquishes their independence, eventually leaving them to believe that they can no longer do for themselves. The aging adult is victim in believing that they are “old”, and subsequently begins to assume behaviors that

depict old age such as moving and thinking more slowly. Researchers have found that this is prevalent in elders that have been over accommodated.

The end result is that it not only affects the elder person but burdens their caretaker as well (Nelson, 2005). Another prejudice that is common is segregation of the old (Cruiksbank, 2009). Cruiksbank notes that even people over sixty five have a disdain for their peers, saying " they do not want to be around all those people" which may be their way of unconsciously avoiding their own mortality (Cruiksbank, 2009, p. 10). She states that distancing themselves may be a way they preserve their autonomy. Cruiksbank sees this as a form of denial, and also counterproductive as she feels solidarity needs to be exemplified by the old especially in this time of their lives. Gerontological research has also found other common patterns among the elderly and their peers. In another attempt to demonstrate independence, the elderly tend to generalize geriatric health issues. They segregate themselves by expressing how fortunate they are not to be suffering the same doomed fate (Cruiksbank, 2009). All forms of media reinforce negative stereotypes associated with aging (Daniel, 1994). By as early as six years old, negative stereotypes have already formed about aging.

These stereotypes continue throughout our lives, and are subconsciously accepted without question. Daniel concludes that society has no role models that favor growing old. An nursing home ad with a dialogue that emulates the aging parent as a problem or burden further acerbates the stigma. Culture and media are designed to postpone the evitable as it is geared towards staying young, and delivers that message from fashion to health

(Daniel, 1994). The result of these stereotypes is that as we age, impending doom invades the individual's thoughts.

In an effort to conform to culture's idea of individualism, the aging population perpetually seeks an elusive youth, thereby denying their mind and bodies the right to age (Daniel, 1994). It is not surprising then as the body begins to breakdown, that the aging person feels embarrassed and insignificant (Cruikshank, 2009). There is an ongoing movement to re-adjust society's perception of what it means to age (Daniel, 1994). In an effort to shift the mindset of America's aging, non-institutionalized studies have been done in American communities to determine the intellectual and cognitive effects of their aging population.

The results concluded that " physical and mental decline is not evitable" (Daniel, 1994). As the aging population grasps at their " desire to have meaning" in their lives, more attention needs to be focused on the positive influences that can enhance their daily existence. These influences include a positive attitude along with making healthy choices for themselves such as food, physical activity and recreation (Kerschner and Pegues, 1998). One way to improve the aging process is to be proactive in developing a healthy lifestyle that includes good eating habits and physical activity.

Research has concluded that the mind is a powerful tool in creating reality so protecting one's health can be a precept to a fighting off future ailments (Kerschner and Pegues, 1998). The choice to give back to the community creates a meaningful and positive response in many ways. The benefit of socially connecting in a structured atmosphere lends opportunity to share

not only wisdom but to develop new relationships that otherwise would not have occurred (Kerschner and Pegues, 1998).

Studies have concluded that people who remain active have a clearer sense of who they are and what value they hold in society as well as their community (Kerschner and Pegues, 1998). For every beginning, there must be an end. There is term called vertical axis which describes the mind-body experience when an infant first enters the world. It is believed that prior to a person's birth, the mind and body are not aware of each other but as soon as they arrive, both are encapsulated by "sensation and emotion" as the two entities meet for the first time (Carvalho, 2008, p. 4).

With the help of a mother's touch, their union becomes a "seamless ensemble" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 4). The two live together, as one, for many years. It is not until the last stage of life, do they find themselves encapsulated by "sensation and emotion" again as now they have grown apart, separated as the aging body or mind is no longer able to oblige the other. They spend the rest of their days laboring until they can agree to leave together, in death. Fear of aging can ignite or dim the remainder of a person's life. There is an array of products, books, and doctors promising new ways to reinvent the old self.

In America, we are driven by the desire to stay young and because of this truth; the aging person experiences certain prejudices. Though, despite theadversity, aging can be a catalyst to many wonderful and positive experiences that could only happen because one is old. One outdated novelty, wisdom, is just waiting to be reinvented by today's aging population, and it would nice to see it be born again. * * * * *

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