



# Optimistic Aging

## How Expressing Optimism Can Enhance Your Golden Years

What if you stopped thinking your best days were behind you, and you started thinking—and speaking—hopefully about the years ahead of you? How could that change your life?

By Christa Melnyk Hines

Could sending that “over the hill” card teasing your best friend about her advancing age land the both of you in an early grave?

It just might, according to a recent survey of New Zealanders aged 40 and older. The survey suggests that how we express ourselves about aging can have an important influence on how well we—including our friends—embrace our golden years.

“When a colleague turns 60, sending a birthday card that jokes about her best years being behind her not only entrenches negative ideas about aging in her mind, but also allows them to take root in our own,” says researcher Craig Fowler, Ph.D., of the Massey University School of Communication.

The happier we are, the more resilient we’ll be to the stress and challenges that accompany aging. In a culture that is predominantly pessimistic about getting older, how can we approach our senior years with a rosier outlook? Here’s what the experts advise:

### Counter negative messages.

First of all, don’t let that old geezer card ruffle your feathers. There’s no need to make the sender feel bad over what’s meant to be a lighthearted gesture.

When we can’t take the joke, “we risk looking like a curmudgeon or a bad sport, which further reinforces the stereotype of

the ‘grumpy old person’,” says researcher Jessica Gasiorek, Ph.D., of the University of Hawaii of Manoa, who collaborated with Fowler on the study.

Instead, respond to ageist messages and remarks with positivity and warmth, humor, or by politely pushing back. For example, you might say, “There’s actually a lot of great things about this time of life.”

Meanwhile, in our society, the fight against aging is pervasive—from expensive elixirs promising youthful skin to cosmetic procedures that turn back time. Try not to contribute to body-shaming messages by obsessing about age spots or wrinkles.

“Most people don’t really think it’s interesting when you complain about your physical flaws. It also makes them associate you with negativity and believe that perhaps you’re judging *their* looks,” says Jennifer L. FitzPatrick, M.S.W., author of *Cruising Through Caregiving: Reducing the Stress of Caring for Your Loved One*.

During your conversations, shift your focus from appearance to the activities and interests that make your life full. And if you have a friend who constantly complains about their flaws, change the subject and gently discourage obsessing about changing appearances.

## Saying is believing.

Cheerfully embracing the wisdom and grace that comes with age can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Research suggests that the more you express a positive attitude about aging, the more you’ll believe it. And like a mirror, people are less likely to see and treat you as elderly.

“To a certain extent, having some ‘pleasant denial’ about your own aging process may help you have a more positive attitude,” says FitzPatrick, who has an 87-year-old acquaintance who remains an active, influential figure in her industry. “People can’t believe how old she is when she tells them, because her actions are not what many expect of someone her age.”

On social media, spread inspiring stories related to aging. And instead of groaning about another birthday, share the wisdom and rich experiences you’ve gained over the past year and what you’re looking forward to in the year ahead.

## Express gratitude.

Jane East, 72, of Grand Prairie, Texas, has weathered plenty of physical and emotional hardships throughout her life, but she’s not one to dwell on the negative.

“Life sends things at you that are really hard. You don’t have a choice of going through them, but you do have a choice of *how* you go through them,” she says.

Over the years, the resilient, now-retired school teacher and grandmother of five has bounced back from breast cancer and two strokes. Seven years ago she lost her husband Bill, a Marine Corps veteran, to cancer. She says his death was one of the toughest experiences of her life, but she’s grateful for the time they had together.

During the couple’s 40-year marriage, Bill’s military career and his work as an explosives specialist in Kuwait often put him in the crosshairs of danger.

“Before he died, we talked about what a wonderful life we’ve had and how fortunate we were to have him with us all of this time,” she says. “That’s what I try to focus on when I get sad thinking about Bill. We have to be thankful for the good things.”

## Stay socially active.

Positive social interaction is key to overall health and well-being. Isolation and loneliness are

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### Living longer than ever!

By 2050, the number of people worldwide that will be aged 65 or older is expected to triple to about 1.5 billion.

dangerous, weakening the immune system and contributing to mental and physical decline and even death. Having activities on the calendar to look forward to keeps life fun and stimulating.

Although she relies on a cane to get around due to a fall last summer, East remains an active, vibrant member of her community.

“I try to focus on what I can do and not what I can’t do. I walk a little more clumsily, but I wasn’t real graceful, anyway!” she chuckles.

Among her commitments, East is the president of her area’s Newcomers and Neighbors Club, a large organization that promotes friendship and community connection through a variety of member activities. She also coordinates the scholarship program on behalf of her local chapter of Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), an organization that was especially dear to her late husband.

### Too old for social media? Never.

Adults aged 50 and older are the fastest growing demographic segment on social media.



## Plug in.

According to a study conducted by researchers at Michigan State University, logging onto online communication platforms such as Skype, social media, and e-mail is linked to lower incidences of depression and loneliness among older adults.

Use online social networks, such as Facebook, to maintain relationships with friends and family and to share photos and stories. If you’re struggling with the latest technology platforms, ask for help from family members or friends who are active online.

## Plan ahead.

Fear is often rooted in uncertainty about the future. That uncertainty can contribute to negative

emotions and attitudes about aging. Address your anxieties head-on by talking to family members, friends, or a lawyer about how you’d like to address your future care needs (e.g., a living will).

“It will be a hard conversation, but you won’t have to feel uncertain anymore,” Gasiorek says. “Surround yourself with people who can support you in the kind of future you want to have.”



## Take care of yourself.

Investing in your health through wholesome eating habits and regular exercise can lengthen your life, reduce your risk factor for chronic disease, and help you maintain good mental health.

Tim Blake, a Japan-based strength coach who works with older populations, says that strength training has a profound effect on his clients, particularly on their levels of self-confidence, resilience, happiness, and overall well-being.

“To most people, a major part of aging is inevitable physical decline,” says Blake, who is the author of *How to Get Lean, Strong and Bulletproof*. “But when folks are actually improving—getting stronger and feeling more energetic—they tend not to feel that they’re aging, because many of the normal symptoms simply aren’t present.”

Over time, Blake says people who engage in progressive resistance training experience more energy and improved flexibility and daily function.

## Keep learning.

Surround yourself with interesting, positive people, take classes, explore your interests, and participate in activities that fulfill your sense of curiosity.

“Curiosity enables us to shift from being a passive observer of our own life to the active, vital participant who thrives,” says Kathy Taberner, coauthor of *The Power of Curiosity: How to Have Real Conversations That Create Collaboration, Innovation and Understanding*.

Take an active interest in the people you meet. Ask questions that get them talking about their lives and their interests and then listen. Not only will people look forward to spending time with you, you’ll feel closer to them.

“Many people, particularly older people, no longer have an experience of someone really listening to them. We all want to feel seen, heard, and understood. When we’re curious with one another, we feel better and are more connected,” Taberner says.



## Live with purpose.

“Living the best life you can is one way to manage fear and anxiety about aging,” FitzPatrick says.

At the end of your life, when you look back, do you think you will feel good about how you spent your time? If not, now is the time to make lifestyle tweaks to

ensure that you feel satisfied with the choices you’re making in your life.

“Each night I ask myself, *What did I do today that made the world a little better for someone?*” East says. “It’s often something small like thanking the mailman or smiling at someone who looks sad. By doing so, I’ve made a difference.”

## Consider the upside of aging.

Despite commonly held assumptions, many people experience greater happiness as they get older. “Mental health is actually at its worst during people’s 20s,” Gasiorek says.

As they age, people tend to experience more stability, focus less on negative issues, and enjoy richer emotional experiences. And with the responsibilities of parenting and career behind you, you’ll have more time to pursue your passions.

If you’re feeling down, reflect back on the many accomplishments and experiences you’ve enjoyed over the years. And a sense of humor doesn’t hurt either. Due to her stroke, East sometimes finds herself standing in the grocery store trying to decipher her grocery list.

“I just laugh about it now. I can no longer spell worth tiddlywinks, and I used to be a perfect speller,” she says. “But I try not to waste any time feeling bad for the things I no longer have. I think that’s a waste of your time. Life’s too short.”

Christa Melnyk Hines is a connection expert and the author of *Happy, Healthy & Hyperconnected: Raise a Thoughtful Communicator in a Digital World* and *Confidently Connected: A Mom’s Guide to a Satisfying Social Life*.



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