

AGING: A NATURAL PROCESS

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Advances in medicine, better distribution of health care services, and improvements in nutrition, housing and working conditions have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of older people living among us. Since this trend will continue and we can all expect to live longer, we must increasingly turn our attention to enriching the quality of life by making it as full and satisfying as possible, for as long as possible.

The changes that occur with aging vary tremendously from person to person. We all hope to retain our vigor, but will probably need a great deal of support and assistance. Understanding these changes and learning successful coping strategies is the first step that we can take to insure a better life for ourselves and our elderly loved ones.

Unfortunately, one reason that aging is looked at so negatively is that we tend to equate aging with disease and loss. But aging and disease are not synonymous and most people experience a process of normal aging and enjoy a "healthy old age." However, the gradual decline that occurs as part of the aging process may affect both physical and mental abilities. And an unfortunate reality is that with "old age" most can experience multiple losses.

Physical Losses

Impairment of senses such as vision, hearing, taste and smell are common. There is usually some decline of physical stamina. Muscles and joints may become less functional. Impaired functioning of vital organs such as the heart or lungs may make the elderly more susceptible to chronic illness. Loss of minerals may cause bones to become more vulnerable to fracture. This condition, osteoporosis, is common especially in elderly women. With normal aging, the skin grows thinner and more vulnerable.

Mental Losses

The ability to learn new material can continue into extreme old age. In some people, thinking becomes slower. Loss of memory is common among the elderly, and the use of memory aids can

be invaluable. These include making lists, writing personal reminders on chalk boards, carrying a note pad, using specially designed self-timing pill boxes and the like.

Personal Losses

The older the person, the greater the probability that they have lost people important to them or lost contact with people who are dear to them. Friends, relatives, or a spouse may have died. Children have grown and established their own households.

Social Losses

After retirement an older adult may lose the satisfaction, status and self-esteem associated with their profession. Loss of physical and mental resources may make it difficult for them to participate in social and recreational activities. Reduced functional capacities and financial limitations can lead to a loss of independence.

When someone you care about is becoming someone you care for, it may help you to be able to know there are places to turn for help. The extent to which we are able to cope with loss depend not only on individual resources, but on the support of families and community resources.

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