



An Oaks of Louisiana White Paper

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The Truth About Aging

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“For many older adults, the experience of aging is a process of learning to offset weaknesses, such as increasing forgetfulness, with strengths, such as practicality and inventiveness.” (Boyd & Bee, 2006, Adult Development)

For years gerontologists, those who study aging, thought about old age exclusively in terms of decline and loss. However, the latest studies have shown that aging is truly a period of tremendous individual variability, rather than one of universal decline.

Here are some interesting points:

- There are three different old age classifications. Young old (60-65), the old old (75-85), and the oldest old (85 and older.) There is a vast difference in how people age, but there are some truths and averages that remain pretty consistent.
- Good news! Life expectancy increases as adults get older. In the U.S. the average age expectancy of a 65-year-old male is 80. If you reach 80, your life expectancy increases to age 90! (Federal Interagency Forum on Age Related Statistics, 2000)
- Even better news! Life expectancy for women is even longer. The average 65-year-old woman in the U.S. lives to age 85. Once she reaches 85 her life expectancy exceeds 90!
- There will be 1,000,000 centenarians by the middle of the 21st century, more than 90% of whom will be female! (Gentlemen, the world appears to be your oyster!)
- A majority of elderly adults tested at 62 for cognitive processes, do not suffer from additional cognitive impairments even as old as 82. (So tell your children you do know what you’re talking about, thank you very much, and your brain is working just fine.)
- Men who are being treated for prostate cancer suffer a decline in cognitive functions due to hormone blocking drugs used for treatment. However, once the drugs are completed, their cognitive functioning improves dramatically.
- Older adults who continue to challenge themselves with complex mental activities can delay or even reverse the normal decline in brain mass that are a part of primary aging (Cottman & Neeper, 1996). Bridge playing (card and many board games) is an excellent activity for maintaining memory functions! Join a card playing group or dominoes or mahjong today.
- Exercise helps maintain physical as well as cognitive functioning (Albert et al., 1995; Lytle, 2004). As little as walking a mile or more once a week makes a significant difference.
- Starting at age 60 there is a decline in hearing and word discrimination. Large gatherings make hearing even more difficult due to background noise. (Don’t be embarrassed to get your hearing tested and wear that hearing aid. Get back into the conversation and enjoy the social life!)
- Bad news! Starting at age 60 our reflexes do slow down.
- Good news! Taste does not decline over the adult years. (So eat up, a little extra meat on the bones in your golden years won’t hurt you.)
- Bad news! The sense of smell declines dramatically after 60.
- Skin sensitivity also declines beginning in the feet first. Also, the response to hot and cold stimuli declines dramatically and in order for a lot of older (75-85) people to enjoy a warm bath the water would have to be so hot it would burn their delicate skin.
- Good news for women: Taste, smell and hearing loss are much more dramatic in men than in women. (I don’t know, maybe being able to smell and hear better could be seen as bad news...I’m just saying...)
- Good news for men: Many more women suffer from arthritis than men do, reducing their ability to take care of themselves (dressing, cooking, generally moving around). This results in many more women living in assisted living or nursing homes as they age (and resulting in loving husbands assisting them!) I think this may be God’s way of letting women get out of housework ... finally!

- Depression may be mistaken for dementia because it can cause confusion and memory loss. So if you think you may be depressed, seek treatment (but remember that depression medication also can cause imbalance and lead to falls).
- Good news! Spiritual support helps lessen depression in the elderly.
- Great news! While it may take the elderly longer to achieve a task, longer to think it through (processing skills) and longer to respond (dulled synapses in the brain slow us down), the end result is very similar to scores of younger adults. (Take that you Generation Xers!)

Always remember three important things to help you age more gracefully:

First - Accept that your mind and body will change as you age and that we find very creative ways to compensate, which help to ease the transition. (Making lists, talking clocks, naps during the day, etc.)

Second - Maintain some level of exercise and socialization. It really does make a difference in maintaining your cognitive skills.

Third - Keep a sense of humor. It not only releases endorphins into your system that make you feel better, it makes everyone around you feel better, too. And since it is a proven fact that positive people attract more friends, and people with friends live longer. It's a win-win situation that no medication in the world can beat! Happy Aging!

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