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360-468-4446
admin@lihhs.org
178 Weeks Road
PO Box 747
Lopez Island WA
98261

www.lihhs.org

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Coping with Changes in Aging

By Elizabeth Landrum, Ph.D.

The poet Stanley Kunitz, who continued to write and publish until his death at 100, left us with these beautiful words: "I have walked through many lives,/some of them my own,/and I am not who I was,/though some principle of being/abides, from which I struggle/not to stray/...I am not done with my changes." (The Layers, 1978). Indeed, aging means continual change, change means loss, and loss means grief — all accompanying our need to maintain a sense of personal identity and purpose.

As social scientists explore the social and emotional aspects of aging, viewing the process as **adaptation** and not just decline, we are learning more about what factors lead to emotional and physical well-being, as well as to distress, depression and poorer health. Although individuals age differently, changes are inevitable, some gradual, some sudden, and all requiring adjustment. Looking at once at the many adaptations we must make as we age, the myriad of losses can feel overwhelming.

An increasingly aware and aging population is experiencing continual change, not only in physical abilities, appearance, robustness and energy, but also in cognitive and sexual functioning, feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem, pride, independence, comfort, and freedom. Along with these changes, there are likely to be observable changes in social roles and relationships, lifestyle, work/hobbies, living conditions, and future plans, as well as losses of loved ones.

Of course, it is changes in the specific parts of ourselves we most identify with and value (e.g. physical strength or mental acuity, attractiveness or accomplishments, certain social roles) that are the hardest to accept. We must let go of the self we once were before we can fully inhabit the self we've become, while "some principle of being abides." A natural **grieving process** will lead to **acceptance** if the various emotions involved in letting go are not blocked, discounted or denied. Then one may engage in the process of learning to absorb, adapt to, and live with limitations. "It's like discovering how the machine still works when some parts are broken or missing," an elder told me. A compassionate listener, who understands grief as natural, necessary, and different from depression, can often be of help to someone dealing with these changes.

Beyond the letting go, what is known about coping with changes that come with aging? Recent research has shown that social isolation is the most

significant predictor of poor adaptation, poor health and cognitive functioning. As people age, those who report stronger **social networks** not only have a greater sense of well-being, but statistically are at lower risk for morbidity and mortality, the effect being comparable to traditional medical indicators such as high cholesterol and smoking.

People who perceive their friends and family members as supportive have the strongest sense of meaning in their lives and experience living with a broader purpose.

What we deem as important for happiness changes with age, as do our priorities. With increased awareness of ourselves and of limited time, we shift our focus even more to the things that bring **pleasure, purpose, and meaning**. "What makes me feel most alive?" is a helpful question to ask ourselves at any stage of life, though the answers change with age. Successful aging may be seen as the ongoing development or unfolding of one's life story, even in the presence of physical decline and other losses.

We know that feeling in control gives one a sense of **mastery** and **accomplishment** and that well-being is associated with **setting goals** that are both personally important and realistically obtainable. Although compromised physical functioning makes some activities effortful or even impossible, anyone can be encouraged to continue engaging in valued activities and pursuing goals, **doing the best one can with what one has**. If an objective cannot be met using the usual strategies, people fare best when they find compensations (e.g. enlisting the help of other people or devices) rather than giving up the goal.

For many, the worst part of getting older is **ageism**, or negative biases and perceptions of aging, whether projected by others or internalized. At least one study has shown that believing these negative stereotypes is more highly correlated with longevity than gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness, or functional health. Currently, **Positive Aging** is a concept being researched and promoted by the World Health Organization and others. Scientists who are exploring attributes of successful aging are concentrating on positive scenarios, highlighting techniques and policies that can help develop more **resilience** while strengthening our sense of **fulfillment** and **control**, despite the challenges associated with growing older.

Positive aging involves positive relationships, self-efficacy, self-compassion, self-awareness, meaningful activities, and the ability to accept change, as we are "not done with our changes."

*I am not
done with
my changes.*

~ Stanley
Kunitz