

The Basic Predicament of Aging

Because very few of us have ever faced the many challenges that come with getting older, I think we have to accept the fact that we are all beginners when it comes to the process of aging. This alone can make it seem daunting as we begin to face these challenges.

These challenges become even more daunting as we add to this our innate and ongoing craving for safety, security, and especially control. Most of us know how difficult it is to accept the reality that very little of life is subject to our control. We simply don't want to feel the uncertainty and helplessness that come up when we see that our belief in being able to control our fate is just an illusion. Yet no matter how hard we try to maintain the illusion of control, aren't we all just one doctor's visit away from the sense of total helplessness? This is a crucial part of the predicament of aging—that we have little idea what's right around the corner.

Along with our innate desire for certainty, we also have a basic human need for meaning and structure. Yet, how does this square with the fact that we live in a world where impermanence is the nature of reality? In practical terms: we get sick, we get old, and we eventually die. All of our attempts to find a permanent ground to stand on will eventually fail. And this is one of the main sources of our fundamental existential anxiety.

When these various difficulties around aging arise, and comfort and relief are not forthcoming, there's often a feeling that life is out of sync. Have you ever heard your mind almost shouting: "This is not how it's supposed to be!" This doesn't just apply to aging; everyone has to deal with the fact that life entails discomfort and disappointment. Perhaps the most basic problem, as silly as it may sound, is that we firmly believe that we should have what we want. We think it's our right, and consequently, we feel entitled to it: for example, we expect good health; we expect the ability to stay youthful and physically fit. Then when life greets us with illness or injury, we commonly experience frustration and even sometimes betrayal. We might feel that something is wrong; we might feel it's unfair, or feel sorry for ourselves, or get angry.

The fact is, we will we never get our old life back—and it can be



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very difficult to accept this. For example, when we have a new or serious illness, our life can become filled with fear. And because fear is powerful, it can make our life feel very dark and narrow. The mind can obsess with fear-based questions: What is happening to my body? Will I ever get well? We worry about being a burden; and at the same time we worry about who will take care of us when we need help. Will anyone even care?

It is also not uncommon to worry about losing what we have. This becomes even more acute as we age, particularly when we regularly experience the loss of our physical strength, our stamina, and flexibility. And especially our sense of youthfulness. This can be the hardest thing. No longer having the same energy and vitality can easily spiral down into depression.

For some, a major difficulty in aging comes with the changes in our appearance. There are those painful moments when we realize we no longer look attractive or appealing, and that there's no going back. When we look in the mirror we can see the graying of our hair and the increasing wrinkles of our skin. Or we can feel the pains in our joints and the aches in our muscles. Maybe we can't see as well or hear as well or walk as well. All of these losses add up to the feeling that nothing is quite the same. The simple fact is, for many, it's no fun getting older. It may seem at times as if everything just starts to fall apart. The author Philip Roth put it this way: "Old age is not an obstacle, it's a massacre."

For some, growing old means loneliness or isolation. For some, it becomes a long wait for the inevitable. And then there may be financial issues—it can be frightening to suddenly find yourself on a fixed income, while at the same time expenses just keep going up.

Added to all of this is our denial in holding onto the illusion that we have limitless time. After all, we've spent all of our lives pretending that only other people get old. Adjusting to the reality that we're actually "them" can be difficult.

Adjusting to our share of difficulties and losses may require examining where and how we get in our own way. We can start with seeing our entitled belief that life should go the way we want; for example, that we should always be healthy and comfortable. Whenever we hear our mind saying, "This is not how it's supposed to be," it's a sure sign that we're caught in an entitlement.

We can also observe the thinking mind, with all of its laments about the past—particularly the lament of wanting our old life back. We can observe our tendency to catastrophize about the future—this alone can get in the way of any kind of equanimity. All of this keeps us lost and without direction.

Part of our problem is that our view is so myopic, so short-sighted, that we miss the bigger point. On the survival level, the point is simply to live. Beyond survival, however, the bigger point is to live as authentically as possible. Why? Because it's our nature to do so. Our true nature strives to reveal itself, just as

an acorn strives to become an oak. This is why our deepest satisfaction is to become who we truly are.

Ultimately we need to focus, experientially, on one of the key issues that we all face as we age—that we feel disconnected from ourselves, from our true nature. Much of our practice is oriented to help us with this, particularly the emphasis on staying truly present with whatever our life is, whether we like it or not. But sometimes the difficulties of aging make it hard to do what is necessary to stay truly present. Yet, although it's a challenge, discovering who we are and our direction is one of the potential rewards of the process of aging. When we resist the realities of aging the result is always suffering—from the small everyday distress to the dark nights that can sometimes seem overwhelming.

I'm aware that this article may sound somewhat grim, and perhaps not hopeful. But in future articles I'll be addressing some of the positive things that we can do to specifically target the difficulties of aging.

*Adapted from Aging for Beginners
(Wisdom, Nov, 2018), Ezra Bayda*