

Staying Young for Life

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We equate the process of aging with the passage of time. Indeed, many aspects of the human process intimately relate to time passing. A newborn is much shorter and lighter than an eighteen year-old; a normal thirty-five year-old can speak, read, write, understand politics and engage in an intimate relationship in ways that a nine year-old cannot do.

But once we are past the initial growing years (up to the late teenage years) the passage of time no longer needs to determine the aging process. It is rather how we are and what we do during that time that matters. What makes one twenty-five year-old "old" while we can think of an eighty year-old who is truly "young?"

In my practice I work with many babies and children with developmental challenges, and I also work with adults who complain of a variety of "aging" issues like pain, loss of mobility, strength, and anxiety. It has become apparent to me that there are specific qualities that underlie youthfulness, and their presence is essential for any child to be able to grow and develop. The very same qualities are also essential in order for adults to be able to stay young.

Many adults lose some of these essential qualities over time. The good news is that any of these essentials can be regained readily at any age.

Let us look at two of these essentials as they occur in children and then let's see how their loss is manifested in adults. First, let's look at the quality of *making variations*. When we observe healthy babies and young children one can see that not only do they

tend to vary a lot *what* they do, but also they vary *how* they do it. They move in and out of an activity not knowing what is the “right” way of doing it and often without a clear goal. They constantly do things in a different way, endlessly experimenting. Now let's look at adults who are losing this essential of making variations. We can think about those adults that tend to set rigid goals and then try to achieve them in a direct, linear and forceful way. Where a child would experiment, they no longer dare to. Anything short of achieving their predefined goal is considered failure. Before long they will avoid future failure by abandoning setting new goals or trying to learn new things. They will increasingly stick to the known. Before long, their vitality, energy and flexibility of mind and body are diminishing. This is aging.

Another essential for staying young for life is seen in the way newborn and young children *feel* strongly the sensations arising from their bodies and from their movements. They are intensely aware of their contact with people and objects. This *awareness of feeling* is an essential basis for all learning. So what happens when young children and adults are discouraged about being sensitive to their own feelings ("Act like a man,") and are encouraged to act in denial of those feelings? When we lose that essential awareness of feeling, we lose our capacity to be informed by our feelings and emotions, and we age.

To what degree have you, the reader, relinquished experimentation with new ideas, activities, beliefs and ways of moving and doing? Have you muffled the intensity with which you feel? Recognizing these two essential characteristics of youthfulness and regaining them is readily available to everyone. And even with just these two restored, you'll find great shifts in energy levels, enthusiasm and well-being.