

GROW OLD ALONG WITH ME, THE BEST IS YET TO BE

By BERNIE SIEGEL, MD

My advice for aging is actually the opposite of the title of this article. I say grow young along with me because though I know there are benefits which come with aging I want to preserve my body and my health and keep them from aging and enjoy the present moment. I always remember the words of George Halas, the owner of the Chicago Bears football team. When he was well into his eighties a friend found him in his office on Sunday, and asked him why, at his age, he was working on a Sunday. His response, "It's only work if there's someplace else you'd rather be."

Just stop and think about that for a moment. How can you age if you never know what time it is? I know from experience and as a physician that the healthiest state one can be in is when you are doing something which makes you lose track of time. When I am painting a portrait or operating upon someone I have no sense of time or self. I am in a trance state and I believe when we are being creative our physiology gives our body a profound live message. The sad part is too many people wait until they are told they have a limited amount of time left to live before they start living their chocolate ice cream.

That expression comes from one of our children who, when I asked him what he would do if he had fifteen minutes left to live, said, "I'd buy a quart of chocolate ice cream and eat it." What I had to learn is that we each have our own flavor and brand of chocolate ice cream. I have letters from people who moved, took off their tie, took violin lessons and did all the things they wanted to do before they died. So they were not denying their mortality just enjoying their life time; their letters often end with, "I didn't die and now I am so busy I am killing myself. Help, where do I go from here?" I tell them to take a nap because they are burning up and not out.

When you ask adults which day of the week is detrimental to their health they will tell you, Monday. When you ask kids they tell you Saturday and Sunday. Why? Because they are doing so much they get exhausted. But they are doing what they love and so a rest will restore them while the adults are not helped by physical rest. So do not wait to start behaving the way you want to and living your life.

Now let me share some of the things I have learned from ninety year olds. One I shall never forget is a woman who, in her nineties developed breast cancer and gall stones. She was quite upset with God for doing this to her at her age but accepted the surgery and moved on in her life. I asked her to join our cancer support group because I knew she had lessons to teach us about survival behavior. One day when everyone in the group was caught up in their fears and what problems the future held I turned to her for help and asked, "What are you afraid of?" After several minutes of silence she sat up and said, "Oh I know; driving on the parkway at night." That resolved everyone's issue as we went from fear to laughter.

I have also learned to not keep family problems from aging parents. When I would call my ninety year old mother and ask her how she was she would tell me her problems with one exception. The exception was if one of her children, grandchildren or great grandchildren had a problem. Then she was focused on advising and assisting them to overcome their problem and move on in life. This gave her a sense of meaning and helped her to feel healthy too. So use the wisdom of the aged, do not hide your problems from them and let them be your guide.

I loved it when I asked my mother what advice she had for seniors that I was going to lecture to. She said, "Tell them to lie a lot." I asked how that would help and she said, "If you tell people how you really feel they'll put you in a nursing home. So lie about it."

Another ninety year old was asked how he kept from falling. His answer, "I watch where I am going."

I also advise seniors to find the oldest doctor they can to take care of them. Then they are less likely to hear this in response to their troubles, "What do you expect at your age?" Years ago there was an internist in a nearby town who practiced well into her eighties and the seniors loved her because she was always there to help and never blamed their age for their problem.

To survive we all need to have a sense of meaning in our lives, and express our emotions, including anger, when we are not treated with respect. Make our own therapeutic choices, ask for help when we need it, respond to our feelings when making choices, maintain an authentic life not just a role and say no to what we do not want to do.

Basically we need to find our way of expressing our love while keeping a childlike sense of humor. I ask seniors how they can die laughing. The answers relate to having accomplished what we are all here to accomplish which is to serve the world in our unique way rather than a way imposed by others and to have your family tell stories about your life when you are ready to die. My father literally died laughing as my mother told wonderful stories about their early relationship. So you need to embarrass your family regularly and give them material to use when you are ready to hear their stories.

When my father was tired of his body he said to my mother, "I need to get out of here." That is when we all gathered and made his transition an unforgettable one that gave the children in the family a very different feeling about death.

My father in law was a great teacher too. He lived to be ninety seven in a body rendered quadriplegic by a fall twenty years earlier. When I asked him for advice for the elderly he said, "Tell them to fall on something soft." A few days later he said to me. "It doesn't always work. They stood me up in therapy and I fell on my wife and broke her leg. So tell them to just fall up." I thought that was a joke until the evening he told us he was tired of his body, refused his dinner, evening vitamins and died that night. As far as I am concerned he just fell up. When love is involved and guilt is not a part of dying how

easy it can be to leave at the appropriate time; either with loved ones beside you or when they leave your bedside to make it easier for them. As many mothers do.

For many seniors the family needs to be there and express the anger they are feeling over their care in various healthcare facilities. In my father in laws record it said, "Son in law causing a problem." Yes, I spoke up because he was afraid that if he complained they wouldn't respond to his needs when he was alone at night with no family there to help him. Some of my complaints were to get them to treat him like a person. When his forehead itched they sedated him instead of scratching his forehead. To have a quadriplegic sleeping all day seemed to me to make his life meaningless. So I complained. There is more to caring then writing prescriptions.

Many years before he died he developed a multitude of symptoms, was unable to eat and was close to death. When a new nursing home was built near our house I said I was going to move him so we could be close to him in his final week of life. I was told I would have to pay his medical bills since I was not in charge of making those decisions. I said I would since he looked only days from his end and I arranged the move.

Within a few days after he was moved he was smiling, eating and not dying. I asked him, "How come you're not dying anymore?" I didn't tell him I was asking for financial reasons. He answered, "I was dying to make the people in the other nursing home happy. They were tired of taking care of me." He lived for many years after that. Again it shows us how important our connections and relationships are to other living things.

We know the benefits of people and pets but even plants and goldfish can prolong survival when they give us meaning. In one nursing home study they put plants in all the rooms but only half the residents were told the plants were their responsibility to water and care for. The others were told they were simply room decorations. Those who were given responsibility lived an average of six years longer.

Let me close with two simple techniques for knowing what the aged are thinking without having to verbalize things they do not want to share. One is to ask, "How would you feel if placed in a totally white room?" and "What is your favorite animal and why?"

When a senior is tired of living or physically exhausted the white room is a spiritual sanctuary they are happy to be in because there is no stimulation and they can rest there. When there is still an active life force they will want to leave, redecorate or put in a picture window.

The description of one's favorite animal is always related to one's feeling about one's self. So an active meaningful description also speaks about the same thing in that person's life and self. When there is no animal, life or energy in their choice they are ready to move on to become dreamless, unalive and perfect again. Please remember that leaving our bodies is a therapeutic decision at some point. When we leave we do not take our afflictions with us. That is another topic we can discuss in another issue; related to near death experiences.

I also see the life force when I ask seniors to draw pictures of themselves as they are today and as they were twenty five years ago. Ninety percent of the time I receive two pictures. One picture revealing a slim happy individual in the past and the other fat and unhappy one today. A small minority hand me one picture saying, "That's me then and that's me now." They understand their attitude is what creates their world. As a blind senior shared after her husband died while she was being wheeled into a nursing home for the first time. "What a lovely place."

"You can't see and have been here for less than five minutes. How can you say that?"

"I decide what I see."

And so it is at every age. So grow young along with me. The best is presently. I have learned from Helen Keller that, "Deafness is darker by far than blindness." So when in doubt about how to help a senior, listen, listen, listen and only say, "Ummm" in several ways. By your listening they will get to know themselves and their needs and then you will receive credit for being an enormous help. I know from experience.