

Musings on Aging

By Dr. Connie

When we were young, many of us thought that anyone over 30 was "over the hill" and not to be trusted. As we ourselves grew older, the bar was raised. Life expectancy increased, and we heard that 60 was the new 40, making 70 the new 50! Approaching 70, the age of 80 seems quite young compared to 90 or 100 years of age. Some of this is due to advancements in medicine and changes in lifestyle, and some is simply a change in perspective.

It is heart rending to me when patients in their young 30's and 40's throw their hands in the air and tell me that they are just getting older and suffering the consequences. It is true that physiologic and anatomic issues arise as we age, a result of the wear and tear of years of living in a less than perfect world. There is, though, a tendency to attribute to aging many changes that are not inherently age related, but are the effect of less than optimal past and ongoing lifestyle choices catching up with us.

There is much that can be done at any age to prevent, ameliorate and even reverse the aches and pains and degeneration of body and mind that plague us and that we associate with aging. A number of friends, family, and patients of chronologically advanced age are more vital and expansive than others less than half their age.

It IS inevitable, though, that one day each one of us will look in the mirror and note that the reflection that we see is not as it once was. We can bemoan and obsess about that, or we can shift perspective away from an assessment based purely on the physical and reframe the experience.

When I think of aging, I hold several images in my mind. One is of the storybook Velveteen Rabbit, who lived with and loved a small boy, and in the process became real. Truly, would we give up all the joys and sorrows of child raising to have back our flat tummies? Would a cancer survivor choose their curly locks over early death? Our bodies bear the scars of the journeys we have taken.

Another image is of a bottle of fine wine, which becomes deeper, more subtle, more delicious with time. This is the way of our minds and moods in optimal aging. We acquire wisdom, learn from our mistakes, gain the perspective of years of experience. If our minds are less sharp and our memories less good, we may delve more deeply into the true nature of who it is that we are, beings of infinite energy inhabiting physical bodies for a time. Who would trade that wisdom for the innocence of a child or arrogance of youth?

Aging with grace and style involves a willingness to embrace the changing state of our bodies and minds; to evolve away from identification with the physical body into identification with our spiritual selves; to see ourselves as part and parcel of a whole in which each stage of life is valued for its unique gifts and opportunities.