

Old Age is not a State of Ill Health

“Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be.”

(From the poem Ben Ezra by Robert Browning)

When do you become old? To a child, a person of 16 years of age is old. A healthy active 80 year old may not consider themselves to be old but rather thinks of someone as being old when they have reached the age of 95. Many people find themselves agreeing with Bernard Buruch’s definition of old age as being “fifteen years older than I am.” As one woman in her eighties said, “I don’t know how this young girl got into this old woman’s body!”

Aging begins at conception and continues until death. We were all born and we will all die. In between we age. Aging is universal since every living organism experiences the process of aging. Aging is sequential. Everybody who lives to be old passes through the stages of infancy, childhood, young adulthood and older adulthood. No one skips a stage. Aging is gradual because it occurs slowly and imperceptibly. Aging occurs at different rates since everyone passes through the stages at their own pace. Therefore, separating the stages by chronological age becomes very difficult. Aging is irreversible because once the process of life is begun we can’t go back to a previous stage. We can only move continually forward.

Aging is not a disease nor is it a state of ill health. There are many diseases which can afflict human beings and certain diseases are more common in later life than in youth. However, there is no disease or disability that is found only in the aged. Even Alzheimer’s disease can occur in people in their middle years and younger people occasionally suffer from strokes or heart disease. While there is a small percentage of older people who live with multiple physical ailments and become frail, there are many who enjoy good health and die without any outward symptoms of fatal disease.

According to Margaret Hellie Huyck in her book Growing Older, the concept of age has different meanings.

The response to the question, “How old are you?” is one’s chronological age – how many years had one lived since birth. Because chronological age is the same for everyone, people are usually ranked and compared by this number. Yet we know that health, physical appearance and abilities of older adults vary greatly. Some at age 65 will seem young while others will seem older.

Biological age refers to how well the physiological organism functions. Different organs function at individual levels. For example, a 60 year old might have the liver of a forty year old, the heart of a fifty year old and the weathered skin of a seventy-year old.

We also measure age by the social time clock. A seventy year old who is still working full time and lives with his spouse in their own home appears to be younger than the seventy year old who has physical frailties.

Intellectual age is a common measurement in childhood. Although it is unusual to test older adults, differences do exist. We all know older adults who are still studying, who keep abreast of current information and events and who are young in their thinking. Conversely, some people in their middle years have stopped learning and seem dull intellectually.

“Old age can be accepted not as something sadly inevitable but something thankfully received as a journey into maturity, wisdom and growth. It can be a time not only of reflection, but of teaching; a time not only of rest, but of modeling; a time of both retirement and service; a time more for giving than for taking; more for care than for consuming; more for being than for doing.”