

Positive Aging Perspectives and a New Paradigm: Foray (4A) into Aging

As more evidence shows the capacity for growth and fulfillment in the later years of life, the concept of positive aging has value in promoting well-being and enhancing the image of older adulthood. A paradigm called Foray (4A) into Aging based on Awareness, Attitude, Affiliation, and Activity demonstrates how this new territory of positive aging can be realized.

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For millennia, the elusive “fountain of youth” has been pursued in Western societies, and no more furiously than with the contemporary flood of anti-aging products. Yet an increasingly vocal group of scholars and advocates promote a very different view of longevity, one in which opportunities to explore, serve, create, and contemplate are abundant. In this essay, a movement called “positive aging” and related developments are discussed, and a paradigm of aging called Foray into Aging (4A) presented. The question, “What’s so positive about positive aging?” is viewed in light of cultural contexts where the concept of positive aging might be seen as an oxymoron.

Since the late 1990s, a new movement in psychology has emerged called *positive psychology*. While only limited attention has been paid specifically to older adults in this movement, the burgeoning concept of “positive aging” has spawned an international conference series and related activities. “It’s been said that

the best way to predict the future is to create it...and positive aging is the future we want to create,” visionary author and scholar Harry “Rick” Moody noted (personal communication, February, 2010).

The Emergence of Positive Aging

A widely-cited book called *Successful Aging* was published by two MacArthur Fellows, John Rowe and Robert Kahn (a physician and a psychologist) in 1998. Their longitudinal research followed a cohort of men and women, in their 70s at the start of the study, who lived in three different East Coast cities in the United States. Three principles were identified to characterize successful aging: avoidance of illness and disability, high cognitive and physical function, and involvement in society (Rowe and Kahn, 1998). Although subject to criticism, the concept of successful aging has subsequently spawned a great deal of research, and is part of a “sea change” in moving toward positive aging as



described by the late Gene Cohen (2006), a pioneer in the field of geriatric psychiatry who shifted the emphasis on the problems of aging to the potential of older adulthood. Even the concept of positive aging has been criticized for not fully encompassing the range of experiences associated with later life. However, voices from various fields such as visionaries Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen are reinventing concepts of aging (Gergen and Gergen, 2017).

Cohen (2005) suggests that in the later years of later life, there is an “Encore” phase where life themes are restated and reaffirmed, and novel ways to explore these themes are pursued. This stage has parallels to Erikson’s Psychosocial Stage of “Generativity vs. Stagnation” (Erikson & Erickson, 1998), which is more focused on care and concern for future generations, primarily during middle adulthood, whereas Cohen’s Encore stage comes much later (age 70 and beyond). Cohen’s focus on creative aging and cultural

anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson’s proposed Adulthood II (Bateson, 2010), where active wisdom is cultivated and identity re-evaluated, highlight the growth potential that epitomizes positive aging.

In parallel to successful aging and creative aging, a conscious aging movement addressing spiritual aspects of growing older has a number of dimensions. In contrast to traditional developmental theories where older adults stop developing or revert to earlier stages, gerotranscendence proposes that older adults develop a form of joy that transcends previous definitions of success and failure. Although not all adults will fully engage in gerotranscendence, individuals of any age may interact with its dimensions: cosmic, self, and relationships, building toward transcendence as they age. The theory of gerotranscendence can benefit caregivers by helping them understand the reality of older adults whom they support, reducing feelings of insufficiency and guilt at work, according to the late

Lars Tornstam (2005), a psychologist whose work has spawned research internationally. For example, caregivers may attempt to stop an older adult from withdrawing in contemplation or from being playful, when in fact quiet contemplation and play are vital to growth at this stage of life. As spiritual leader Ram Dass suggests, we are all souls connecting on our mutual paths, rather than being strictly defined by caregiver/care recipient roles (Dass, 2013).

Although there is no one definition of “positive aging,” psychiatrist George Vaillant proposes one in his landmark book, *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life*. He writes: “Positive aging means to love, to work, to learn something we did not know yesterday, and to enjoy the remaining precious moments with loved ones” (Vaillant, 2002, p. 16).

Foray (4A) Into Aging Paradigm

The confluence of research and engaging in the positive dimensions of growing older led to the paradigm called Foray (4A) into Aging. Envisioning “foray” as a new venture and picturing 4 “A” words like aces in a card deck, Corley (2011) used the domains of Awareness, Activity, Affiliation, and Attitude to inspire a program of Lifelong Learning at California State University, Los Angeles. In the following text, each domain is described and related to the positive aging evidence base, and a positive aging exemplar noted. The dimensions of Foray Into Aging (4A) encompass the broader range of experiences beyond the purely “positive” and “successful” notions of older adulthood, and are inter-related and additive when considered integratively.

AWARENESS: ACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF WELL-BEING

One of the three principles Rowe and Kahn (1998) identify to age successfully is “avoidance of disease and disability,” and here this is conceptualized more broadly, including being *aware* of predisposition to illness. Various estimates suggest that up to one-third of aging can be attributed to genetic factors; therefore, knowing about family history of major causes of death (e.g., heart disease and cancer) can offer opportunities to implement lifestyle changes that reduce the likelihood of disability associated with certain diseases.

Awareness of the abundant benefits of exercise, moderation in alcohol consumption, and the importance of sleep are examples of seemingly simple and obvious factors that impact quality of life as one ages. However, implementing lifestyle changes in these areas can be challenging. A good place to start is with a program designed to estimate life expectancy, calculated on the basis of family background and lifestyle

factors (e.g., Living to 100 Life Expectancy Calculator: <http://www.livingto100.com/> or the Blue Zones Vitality Compass: <https://apps.bluezones.com/en/vitality>). These relatively simple online programs can identify risk factors, many of which are modifiable, that impact longevity.

ACTIVITY: ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN DAILY LIFE

There is a wide variation in how people adapt their level of activity as life circumstances change. In some cases people have more opportunities for exercise, going to museums and other stimulating activities after retirement. Others may occupy their time to excess, avoiding the grief that can accompany leaving a job or losing a loved one.

As people age, there are many opportunities for connection, as well as fulfillment, through activities that are engaging and enlivening. For example, the groundbreaking work of Cohen (Cohen, 2000; 2005; 2006) and colleagues highlights the role of the arts in promoting well-being. The National Center for Creative Arts (NCCA) identifies supporting research as well as arts programs available nationwide that engage older adults in active participation (<http://creativeaging.org>).

High cognitive and physical function is a component of successful aging (Rowe and Kahn, 1998), suggesting that activities which engage mind and body are crucial to midlife and later life wellness. Lifelong learning programs offer opportunities for adults aged midlife and older to become intellectually stimulated, socially engaged, and often physically active. There are numerous programs nationally, such as those through OASIS (<http://oasisnet.org>), Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (<http://nrc.northwestern.edu>) and the Third Age Network (<http://thirdagenetwork.ca/canadalist.html>) in Canada, where classes, events, and volunteer opportunities are readily available. For those wishing to contribute to societal well-being, the Encore movement highlights the contributions of hundreds of people over age 50 who have started new ventures to improve communities and the world (<http://encore.org>).

Starting a “social portfolio” helps tap into creative potential in later life (Cohen, 2000) and can be just as important as a financial portfolio in lifelong planning. The social portfolio is conceptualized along two dimensions: individual/group efforts on one axis, and mobility/energy levels on the other. Where a person is situated along these dimensions is associated with different types of activities (e.g., an individual activity for someone with low mobility and low energy might be the creation of a “Secret Recipes” family cookbook) (Cohen, 2000, p. 167).

AFFILIATION: ACTIVE CONNECTION WITH OTHERS

There is a vast body of research affirming the positive impact of social engagement on well-being. With increasing age, people are more likely to experience cumulative losses such as the death of parents, siblings, friends, spouses/partners, and others. The dangers of social isolation and loneliness are receiving increased attention in research and programs for older adults. The “Connect2Affect” initiative of the AARP Foundation (<https://connect2affect.org>) and The Daily Call Sheet program of the Motion Picture and Television Fund (Corley, Feldman and Kaiser, 2018), making daily calls to vulnerable older adults by volunteers, are examples of organizations seeking creative solutions.

New positives are emerging for midlife and older adults who are caregivers (and most are or will be caregivers for one or more older adults). Research increasingly shows the benefits of caregiving, although much of the focus is still on the burdens and costs. Affiliation with a like community, such as a support group for caregivers of persons with dementia or other debilitating conditions, provides reinforcement for this crucial role.

By nurturing and encouraging relationships among generations, many of the needs of all generations can be met. Intergenerational practices facilitate relationship-building within families, but they can also include friends outside of the family, co-workers, caregivers, and many others.

Preparing for possible social, physical, psychological, spiritual, and health needs requires awareness of the resources in the current living environment. Village to Village is a community-based network of membership organizations designed to promote aging in place. The collective of close to 200 organizations in the U.S. alone coordinates and brokers services for its members. Volunteers help each other and offer health and educational programs (<http://vtvnetwork.org>). This movement highlights the focus on affiliation and affinity (e.g., through neighborhoods or even faith-based organizations) that helps older adults stay integrated in their community.

ATTITUDE: ACTIVE REFLECTION ON LIFE EXPERIENCES

In the field of gerontology, theories related to spirituality such as gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) shed light on the importance of reflection. This represents a shift in perspective to one more cosmic and transcendent, from a previously more rational and/or materialistic one. This shift is usually accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. Developmental

psychologist Erik Erikson anticipated this shift when he posited the psychosocial stage of “ego integrity vs. despair,” which concerns self-acceptance and finding meaning in the whole of one’s life. His wife and collaborator, Joan Erikson, later added gerotranscendence as a final stage (Erikson & Erikson, 1998).

Gerotranscendence involves going beyond the dualism of activity and disengagement in what Joan Erikson (1998) calls a “major leap above and beyond the fear of death.” When this happens, caregivers and family members can misinterpret the resultant play, activity, joy, and song as a reversion to childhood. In fact, older adults may be afforded the opportunity to transcend the universe and time. Joan Erikson coins the term *gerotranscendence*, adding another layer to the theory of gerotranscendence, indicating that this time in adult development is not only about meditation and contemplation, nor is it simply withdrawal, but in fact it is about making and doing in a way that is not attached to the ego and societal norms. Creative arts are often how this stage of life is expressed.

Activities such as reminiscence, life review, and autobiography have flourished in the aging field to help older adults integrate their life experiences and leave a legacy when possible (Cohen, 2005). Structured approaches such as Guided Autobiography (<http://guidedautobiography.com>) provide a group experience for reflection and sharing of life experiences and world view, as well as engaging in a creative process around life themes.

At age 93, in her preface to the extended version of their book *The Life Cycle Completed*, Joan Erikson says, “As we passed through the years of generativity, it had never felt as though the end of the road were here and now” (Erikson & Erikson, 1998, p. 4). In fact, positive aging for older adults may not concern legacies and materialistic visions, but instead, adults in their 80s and 90s who still have their health may choose privacy and solitude so that they may be “deeply involved in disinvolvement” (p. 125). According to Frank Ostaseski (2017), cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project, it is a time when we are called to disown the story we may hold within us that says we will never die. Ostaseski is speaking about an element of gerotranscendence when he counsels us to live as if we are dying, and Ram Dass similarly encourages being conscious about dying as well as living (Dass, 2013).

Positive Aging Exemplar: Dr. Jan Hively

As a counter to the many negative stereotypes about older adults, Dr. Jan Hively is a beacon of inspiration and an active member of the positive aging movement. Born during the Great Depression era in the U.S.,

in her 60s she earned a Ph.D., in her 70s founded a network called Shift in Minneapolis (as well as the Vital Aging Network and the Minneapolis Creative Arts and Aging Network), and in her 80s co-founded an international organization called the Pass It On Network (<http://passitonnetwork.org>). Dr. Hively was named a Purpose Prize Fellow as a social entrepreneur in 2006 (<https://encore.org/purpose-prize/jan-hively>).

While these accomplishments emphasize the Activity component of the Foray (4A) paradigm, as a mentor to many, Dr. Hively recognizes the importance of Affiliation, and through Awareness and Attitude has maintained her wellness in spite of health challenges. She continues to envision the world as a place where generations can thrive working together.

Conclusion

Older age is a time of growth and exploration, with benefits to individuals and society at large. The Foray (4A) into Aging paradigm builds on research from the last three decades to offer a blueprint for a full and satisfying life in older adulthood. Awareness, Attitude, Affiliation, and Activity each play an interconnecting role to build a richer experience later in life.

The creative aging theme within positive aging highlights the capacity for productive growth in the later years. Conscious aging and gerotranscendence widen the lens to include gaining perspective on loss and inevitable life changes, and preparation for death. Successful aging includes health and social dimensions that inform well-being. Caregivers can benefit from an awareness of shifts in priorities and self-awareness as their loved ones age.

Redefined possibilities for development in the second half of life give hope to those who struggle with the ageism so prevalent in Western society. Maintaining and expanding social connections and making meaning in life are paramount. Ultimately, the active wisdom of an increasingly aging population can help address many challenges of living in the modern world. •CSA



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