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The transitions of aging: How parents and adult children can adjust

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Aging can bring changes to people's bodies, minds and relationships — changes that many are often not prepared for.

Erlene Rosowsky, a clinical psychologist who specializes in aging, says many people don't see these changes coming because society is obsessed with youth. The emphasis is on all things "anti-aging," she says — not the realities of getting older.

"There is a lot of ageism in society, which bolsters the illusion of control and avoiding it," Rosowsky says.

But once people begin to experience some of the realities of aging, they may find that younger folks don't really get it.



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A couple of years ago, my mom, then in her early 80s, was given a slate of knee exercises to do to keep her mobile. "I've realized I'll have to do these exercises for the rest of my life!" she announced. "I didn't know being old would be so much work."

Aging was work? I'd never thought about it that way. Then I realized that if, like her, I'd never much enjoyed exercise to begin with, and someone told me I had to start a daily regimen when I was already stiff and in pain, I'd dread it too. But she applied herself and is still doing the exercises today.

Rosowsky, who herself is 82, says it's not just that changes to health, cognitive abilities and mobility crop up as people age. One's sense of self often changes as people leave a longtime career and relationships alter as friends move away or die. But, she says, people can adjust. Rosowsky says her body "doesn't look the way I remember it because I'm an older person," but she doesn't get hung up on it. She used to love cross-country skiing but no longer takes to the trails. She retired from teaching at a university but still researches and writes.



Arielou Marcy at her home in Virginia this summer.

Brooke Marcy

Arielou Marcy is 86 and has weathered some major changes recently. She lives in Lynchburg, Va., and lost her husband of 62 years a couple of years ago. Living without him has been a huge adjustment. However, Marcy lives with one of her daughters, two dogs and four cats, and she says she also has good neighbors and friends. These humans and animals keep her motivated.

The most aggravating change she deals with on a daily basis is scoliosis — curvature of the spine. Instead of standing upright, "I go east to west," says Marcy. The condition alters her gait, and sometimes it just hurts. "It's driving me nuts," she says.

Still, she doesn't want scoliosis to define her life. She takes a few over-the-counter painkillers a day, goes to physical therapy twice a week and continues to attend the yoga classes she has been going to for years.

She also stays focused on the things she has, not those she lacks. "Be ever grateful for the things you can do," she says. "Don't keep thinking, 'Oh, I used to be able to do that.'"

She says living with one of her children helps keep her positive. "I have purpose," she says, in being there for her daughter when she gets home from work and helping to keep the house and pets cared for. The two of them are close.

But adult child-older parent relationships can be riddled with exasperation on both sides.

It can be hard for adult children to understand what their parents are going through as they age, because they haven't gone through it themselves. Parents may feel that lack of empathy keenly.

How adult children can help parents adjust to change

Rosowsky says there are several ways adult children can help aging parents adjust to life's vicissitudes. This may involve an attitude tweak on the child's part.

First, slow down and listen, Rosowsky says. Listening is the most important thing an adult child can do for an older parent, but middle-aged offspring are busy and rushed. For anyone on a short visit, she says, why not ask your parent how you can best spend your time with them? And if a parent is struggling with a change to their health, for instance, she suggests saying something like, "I'm seeing this might be hard for you. Is that what you're feeling?" She says there is often a gap between what the adult child thinks a parent needs and what that parent feels they need.

Another thing children may try to oversee is a parent's diet. Many people end up having to alter their diets as they get older. But there's a difference between helping a parent stay on track with a new regime and bludgeoning them with reminders. Rosowsky says by all means make sure Mom or Dad has the information they need about whatever they're supposed to consume and avoid. But if they keep returning to a bag of Cheetos, curb your exasperation.

"As long as a parent is competent to make decisions, they're competent to make lousy decisions or decisions you wouldn't make," she says. She adds that the mission of the child is to keep their parent safe and healthy. The older adult,

though, "doesn't want to be wrapped up." Rather, they want to maintain their sense of autonomy and advocacy.

Finally, Rosowsky says, ask your parent to tell stories. In some of her past work in nursing homes, she saw a lot of physically frail people receiving intimate care from staff — the kind of care that felt humiliating to the recipient. It was a big, unwelcome change to their daily existence.

But when the staff member asked the older adult to tell them a story about their life, it altered the dynamic. "The communication went much better," she says, as the older person wasn't a helpless resident being tended to. By telling a story, she says — by giving something — the older adult became an equal part of the exchange.

But sometimes knowing what "should" be done collides with the reality of what one actually gets around to doing. Arielou Marcy is resisting the pressure she feels to make changes to her longtime home — to purge the house of clutter because doing so will, she's told, make things easier for her children after she's gone.

"Why should I get rid of all the things I love that I've had throughout my life?" she asks, pointing out an old rocking horse that used to belong to her husband as a child, a teacup from her grandmother and artwork made by her daughters, who are now in their 50s.

Much of the time she's happy to adjust, she says. But sometimes, she's not.

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