



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

happiness as we age

Recently I noticed that I have less strength in my hands. A small thing perhaps, but, like most signs of aging, it crept up unexpectedly and surprised me. Dealing with the visible and invisible signs of aging takes up more space in my life these days. I remember my Grandmother a lot, how her ears got bigger, her scalp turned pink, her hair thinned and she kept a list of all of her friends who had died. I am grateful that both she and my very dear Grandfather offered role models of aging cheerfully and largely without complaint.

One of the biggest challenges of Baby Boomers is coming to grips with our aging bodies and our mortality. While aging may not be easy or always pleasant, it certainly beats the alternative and many do not have the privilege of growing old. Much to my surprise, I am happier than I have ever been. How can that be? What are the secrets of happiness?

I believe each of us has to find our own way to happiness and I know that some people have health and/or financial issues that make their lives far more difficult than mine. Also trauma, depression, anxiety, and other issues often must be worked through in order to find our way to happiness. So with great humility I offer what has been helpful to me and what experts confirm are important to finding happiness: Acceptance, Gratitude, Awe, Respite and Community.

ACCEPTANCE

Buddhists talk about the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable. Whether psychological, physical, or economic—we experience pain in life. Suffering is optional. Suffering comes when we rail against what is, when we get stuck asking questions like “why me?” or ruminating over the unfairness of something, or what might have been. While we cannot help those thoughts and feelings from occurring, if we feed them and dwell on them they make the pain far worse. Acceptance frees up our energy for action to make the best of our situation.

GRATITUDE

Think of something for which you are grateful, it can be small or large but it is something that makes you smile. Bring it to mind fully, deeply and notice how you feel. Do you feel your heart opening? Do you experience a warm feeling in your body? Do you feel a bit of tension releasing? Gratitude keeps us in the present and fosters feelings of contentment and well-being.

AWE

Do you remember a time you were aware of being a part of something far bigger than yourself? A deep appreciation of the vastness and beauty of our universe? Looking out over the ocean or up at the moon and stars can evoke such wonder as can the beauty of a small flower, a spider web, a deer. The sight of a newborn child or someone we deeply love can spark these moments of awe. Some find a connection with the Divine in spiritual community, worship, prayer, or meditation. Our sense of time expands, worries and troubles seem to melt and we have an experience of peace. Making time and space for these moments to occur is vital to our physical, emotional and spiritual health.


RESPITE

Respite provides time in our daily lives that replenishes and restores us. We need to have access to places that provide a sense of beauty and peace—in nature or in a small spot in our home where there is order and beauty. Often silence and stillness are a part of the experience, but these moments can occur in the safety and comfort of others. Respite comes from experiencing the peace of being fully aware in the present, letting go of thoughts and desires and just being. Meditation and prayer may provide respite. Fishing, walking, running—anything that gets us out of our heads and into our hearts and the present moment offers respite. We can recall the peace of these moments wherever we go.

COMMUNITY

We all need a group where we feel the love and care of family or friends. We can find it in spiritual or secular spaces, but the defining characteristic is that people know who we are and we care about each other.

All of these are somewhat overlapping and reinforce each other, and all contribute to being able to stay in the present moment—not ruminating about the past or anticipating the future, but fully living in the only moment we ever have—right now. They get us out of ourselves and into our present experience.

Happiness does not mean that we do not experience unpleasant feelings. We still experience grief, pain, anger, and the myriad of human emotions. Happiness just means that we don't stay overwhelmed by the negative. We may always have periods where joy eludes us for a bit. But we remember that we will find our way back to a sense of well-being and happiness. Acceptance, gratitude, awe, respite and community help me find my way back. 

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