

YOUR TIME

Growing older: you have arrived

Aging is a slow, natural process. People do not age at the same rate, so each person has individual needs.

Expect changes throughout lifetime

Aging brings changes. From birth, everyone undergoes a wide variety of changes, which is part of normal human development. Following are a few changes that older adults should expect.

Physical changes

Although most older adults are healthy, common changes include: less energy, slower responses and changes in appearance. Eyesight and hearing also may change, and many older adults find they take longer to heal from illnesses or injuries. Some also find that their sleep patterns become disrupted, as they may nap during the day and then sleep only a short while at night, which leads them to need a nap the next day, and so on.

Arthritis or other illnesses may bring new day-to-day limitations. One way to cope is to think of this as a way to use your creativity to solve problems. For instance, someone who has trouble reaching items on a top shelf may use barbecue tongs. Someone else may change door knobs to door handles – which are easier to turn. Those who find it difficult to see at night may plan activities for the daylight hours and use the evening hours for solid relaxation.

Social changes

Older adults who are not employed have more time for relaxation. Opportunities exist to volunteer, develop a hobby, take an educational class, and work part-time in a new field – all the activities for which there was no time in earlier years.

It's important to have a plan for the day. Sometimes too much free time can be a problem. Without something planned for each day, the days may seem without purpose or may seem unsatisfying. Sometimes all it takes is a walk or bike ride every morning to bring an activity to the day or to start the day off right. This is also a way to get to know people you may have been too busy to meet previously.

It's important to keep in touch with family and friends. Do this through visits, calls and letters. Clipping items from the newspaper is a way to keep up on mutual interests with minimal effort. Or perhaps a new hobby is a way to stay in touch – send someone a card you have made yourself, or invite someone to take a class with you.

Sharing special occasions such as holidays and birthdays offers other opportunities.

Emotional changes

As with other stages in life, some adjustments must be made in this stage. As an older adult experiences losses – retirement, physical changes, death of family and friends – he or she naturally experiences the stress brought about by these changes.

People at all stages of life need to give themselves time to mourn and adjust to losses. As an older adult, the changes may seem to have more impact because there is more time to think about them. It's OK to feel sad, but remember that former methods of coping may not work now.

For instance, older adults may have been accustomed to talking to people every day at work and may now find that most days are spent alone, unless special effort is made to plan something. This means the usual way of dealing with change – talking to others in the same situation – is gone. Older people may need to make a special effort to seek people to talk with.

Many choices

Change, while difficult, is not necessarily bad. It is, after all, another chance to challenge yourself, to try new things, to develop creative solutions, to make decisions.

It's important for older adults to be responsible for choices about well-being. The older adult may decide to ask others for opinions. However, the final decision belongs to the older adult.

By the same token, it may not be possible to do everything alone. This, too, can require an adjustment. But help is available. Locate community resources. Household helpers, lawn care, house maintenance, visiting nurses, delivered meals, health care professionals and senior centers are just a call away. Some services are offered at no or low cost to older adults.

If you need help

If you need more advice, call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 or toll-free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. © www.genhs.org