

**GROWING**  
**OLDER**  
**WITHOUT**  
**GETTING**  
**OLD**



# Everyone ages, but here's what you can do to add happy, productive years instead of becoming self-centered and cantankerous as time goes by.

**I**t's happening often now—more often than I like. I sit down on an airplane and introduce myself to the stranger in the next seat. He looks at me and asks, as if on cue, “Are you retired?”

Retired? Do I really look that old?

My wife giggled the first time the counter girl at Wendy's handed me their Golden Age Discount card. I didn't think it was funny.

Then last week, on my way into the hospital to visit a friend—a lot of my friends are going into the hospital these days—I approached the big glass door and saw my father coming out.

It was quite a start!

Of course, it wasn't my father coming out. He died 12 years ago. It was me going in. Or at least my reflection. Wrinkled neck, bald head, gaunt face and rimless glasses. I looked just like he did—and he was an old man.

In March I turned 58. My spirit, thoughts and abilities are still young. My body can outlast most of the youngsters half my age that I play basketball with three times a week. All my organs are working fine. I weigh less and feel better than I did when I was 30. But my face is a dead giveaway. It is a constant reminder that aging is an inevitable process.

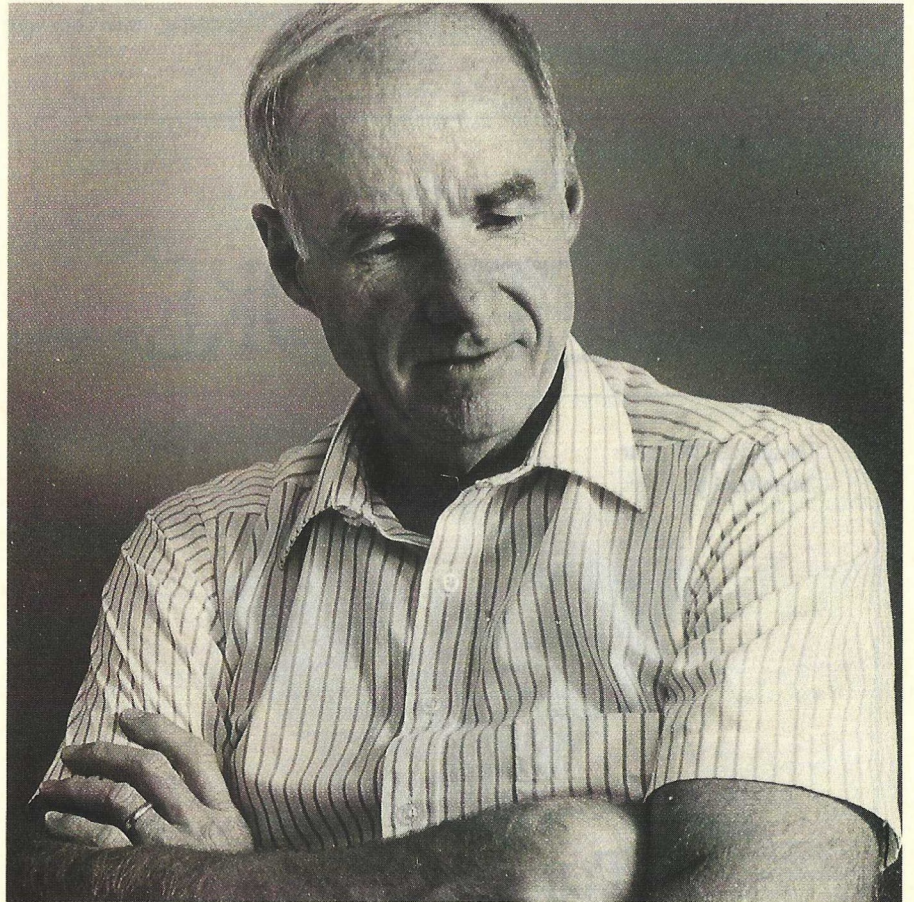
The question: Is it possible to grow older—without getting old?

*Older* is a desirable state that gives new meaning and authority to life.

*Old* is a horrible state in which mind and body vegetate that is followed—not quickly enough—by death.

Other than bifocals, I've chosen to adjust rather than tamper with what is happening to my body. I decided not to tighten my face with cosmetic surgery. Nor am I going to go out and buy hair. (I've never seen a wig-wearing man who didn't look like he was wearing a wig.)

It's not just happening to me. It's



## By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

happening to everyone. We're getting older. Aside from drugs, the aging of America is the nation's biggest problem.

*Modern Maturity*, the magazine published by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), has recently passed *Reader's Digest* as the largest subscription magazine in the world—with almost 18 million paid circulation.

For the first time in U.S. history, there are more people over 65 than there are teenagers. Advances in health and medicine have increased life expectancy until today living to be 80 is normal.

This “blessing,” however, has brought huge problems.

Loneliness, for one. Fifty years ago most old people stayed at home, often cared for by an unmarried daughter. Only a few lived alone. The churches had a name for these people: “shut-ins.”

Today there are few shut-ins. The elderly ride around on three-wheel bicycles and shuffle slowly through our grocery stores. Those who are unable to care for themselves—and the number is growing by the millions—are shunted off to a new kind of institution that has sprung up: the nursing home. Here many old people miserably vegetate out the extra years given them by medical technology.

The aging of America has brought other problems. In 1948 half of all



American men 65 or older were still working. Today only 16 percent of men in this age group remain on the job.

These early retirees, who are now living 13 years longer than when the Social Security law was passed, are rapidly using up the Social Security Trust Fund. Despite constant increases in taxes, many economists predict the money will soon be gone.

Then what? Nobody knows.

The facts are these: We're all going to live longer than we used to, and regardless of how old we are now, one day we'll be numbered among the elderly.

One thing is certain: Both America and the church are graying.

Demographers, those who study the composition and pattern of human population, divide "the aging" into four age groups:

- Older: 55 and over
- Elderly: 65 and over
- Aged: 75 and over
- Very Old: 85 and over

Census statistics use the category of 65 for "old." You can start drawing Social Security at 62 and qualify for AARP at 55.

In 1776 only one out of every 50 Americans was over 65. Today one out of nine Americans (11 percent) exceeds 65. In the state of Florida, where I live, those figures are double—and by 1995 will triple. Within 50 years one person in 12 in the United States will be at least 80 years old—and in Florida that figure will approach one person in eight. By the year 2050, half the persons in Florida will be over 65.

These figures are especially alarming when it comes to women. In 1900 a woman's life expectancy was 45 years. Today it is 80. A man's life expectancy is only 71.5. Women predominate in the grim statistics of one-person households, reduced income, increased poverty, greater risk of ill-health and institutionalization. Demographics from the White House Mini-Conference on Older Women in 1989 revealed:

- The average age for widowhood to begin is 56.
- More than four-fifths of surviving spouses are female.
- Chances of remarriage are slim.
- Three-fifths of all women 65 years and older are unmarried.
- Two-thirds of all widows live alone.
- More than one-third of all women 65 years and older live alone—a figure that has doubled in the last 15 years.
- Elderly women are twice as likely to be poor than elderly men.
- Three-fourths of all nursing home residents are women.
- The elderly are the most vulnerable people in America—to violent crime, scams, disease, death, despair—even more so than infants, who are perhaps the most protected.

Looking at these figures, I became aware of several things. For a nation that has been obsessed with youth, there is now a major shift in population trends. The elderly now dominate our society. Yet the church, which always seems to lag behind in solving social

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problems rather than being on the cutting edge, is still uncomfortable with our elderly. How, we worry, do we put our youth on the racetrack without putting our elderly out to pasture?

Yet in the average church, older people hold the bulk of the money, experience, spiritual power, physical resources. These people must not be neglected. In fact, the church is under a divine mandate to evangelize, train, uti-

lize, minister to, care for, protect, house, clothe, heal and encourage these mature sheep. But very few churches seem to realize there is a major social transformation taking place in the nation, and even fewer have specialized ministries to the elderly.

Last year my mother entered a nursing home. We offered to bring her into our home, along with my wife's 81-year-old mother, who now lives with

us. My mom refused, desiring to spend her last years in the Baptist Nursing Home located on the old homestead property given by my father.

I am grateful for my father's foresight in helping provide for my mother and others like her. But despite the loving care of Christian workers, the quality of her life is miserable. She has to be hand-fed most of the time. She spends most of her life in bed, unable to turn over by herself. Infants, at least, are able to be picked up, loved, cooed over and taught. They are also growing out of their helplessness. The elderly are simply growing more helpless.

I visit my mom regularly. Those visits have firmed my determination: I will never allow myself to fall into such a state.

One of my aging heroes was Congressman Claude Pepper, who at his death at 88 wore two hearing aids, trifocal glasses and a pacemaker. He once wore a toupee but abandoned it after it blew off when he was greeting President Jimmy Carter at the Miami airport.

### **Live to Be 100**

I have made some determinations that will help me grow older without getting old.

For one, I have struck the word "retirement" from my vocabulary. I plan to die with my boots on—and not soon, either.

I also believe God has promised me that I can live to be at least 100 years of age. Not as a vegetable locked into a caged bed in some lonely nursing home, but in good health and with clear mind, creating and producing until the day I die in my own bed, surrounded—as old Isaac was—by my children and grandchildren.

That's the reason I began this study—to protect my future and to share with my friends how to protect theirs.

Dr. Kenneth Pelletier, an international expert on longevity and professor of internal medicine at the University of California-San Francisco Medical School, says the latest scientific research shows that man has a biological potential of 120 years. That does not strike me as impossible. When Moses was that age "his eye was not dim



[some scholars say that means he still had a clear mind], nor his natural force abated [which means, literally, he still had a high sperm count]" (Deut. 34:7, KJV).

Pelletier's studies concluded that attitude and lifestyle—not genetics or age—are the major difference between those who look and act younger than their age and those who look and act old. The key to staying young, he said, is what gerontologists call the "aging setpoint." This setpoint is governed by how old you think you are and by what you consider middle age.

People who believe 40 is middle age send a signal to their bodies to begin a decline. Such people seldom live beyond 70 and never live beyond 80. If, however, you live and behave as if 60 is middle age (one-half your 120-year potential) you forestall the aging process by telling your body there are a lot of young years still ahead. (I now tell everyone that at 58 I am "approaching" middle age.)

Eight years ago on March 27—the day before my 50th birthday—I was standing in the shower feeling sorry for myself. The next day I believed I would become old. Everyone I knew who had turned 50 was old.

I had read Robert Benchley's *Life Begins at 40*, but I feared 50 as instant impotency—the final stage of vegetation before death. When I thought of age 50, phrases like "oldtimer," "last legs," "creaky" and "ancient" came to mind. Now it was about to happen to me.

Standing in the shower that morning I heard a little voice whisper, "It's My desire to give you at least another 50 years of life."

"Lord, I don't want to live to be 100. Old people are miserable."

"You can grow *older* without becoming *old*."

"Hundred-year-old people live like vegetables."

"I don't want My sons and daughters to be vegetables. They choose that course early in life. I want you to have another 50 years of creative and productive life. All you need to do is cooperate with Me."

I knew what He meant. Or at least I knew where He wanted me to



start. When you're standing in the shower and you can't even see your toes because your stomach is in the way, you don't need to ask twice what God means when He says "cooperate."

So I did a number of things. I started by losing weight. Then I changed my diet, exercise pattern and—most important—my attitude about aging.

Now I'm on my way to growing *older* without becoming *old*.

European Jews, taking their cue from Moses, used to greet one another with a Yiddish blessing: "*Lebn gezunt biz hundert un tsvantsik*." It means: "[May you] live in health to be 120."

Why not? All you have to do is cooperate with God. □

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# 20

## THINGS TO HELP YOU GROW OLDER WITHOUT GETTING OLD

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

**H**ere are 20 things I've noticed about people who age successfully. I have incorporated them into my life to help me grow *older* without getting *old*.

1. Older people have no fear of aging. Unlike old people, they know of the tremendous benefits that come with maturity: wisdom, experience and spiritual authority.

2. Older people always think younger than their chronological age. They don't consider themselves to be middle-aged when they are merely 50. They never refer to themselves as "senior citizens" nor complain about advancing years.

3. Older people have a deep sense of purpose in their lives. They reject the idea that "older" means they are disqualified from certain things in life reserved for youth.

4. Older people do not dress or act like old people. They do not wear "old-people clothing." Their styles are up-to-date—from shoes to underwear.

5. Older adults are lean adults. They discipline themselves to eat quality



foods that provide nutrients, strengthen the immune system and guard the body against premature aging.

**6.** Older people place primary value on physical exercise. They know a body that is not exercised begins to die.

**7.** Older people spend more time with young people than with old people. Old people tend to group. They take on each other's characteristics—speech, thinking, mannerisms. On the other hand, older people who stay youthful think and act younger than they really are because they play, worship, exercise and work with young people.

**8.** Older people are mentally active. Old people stop learning—some at a very early age. They never try to expand their scope of knowledge. Alert older people stay abreast of current events, actively create and constantly take on new and adventurous projects. They learn something new every day. Some master foreign languages. Others learn to play musical instruments. They travel to exciting places, go to night school, take on personal spiritual projects—either individually or with a group.

**9.** Old people don't bathe, look unkempt and often smell bad, while thoughtful older people practice wise hygiene. Such older people keep themselves looking younger than their chronological peers by taking care of the "temple of the Holy Spirit." They shun garish cosmetics but take pains to use basic hygiene to keep their bodies looking attractive.

**10.** Older people are disciplined people. They don't smoke, which destroys heart and lungs, nor drink, which destroys brain cells and impairs thought processes.

**11.** Older people laugh a lot. They take life lightly, knowing that God is in control of all situations. They laugh at themselves, especially as the aging process causes changes in bodily and mental functions. They know how to play and enjoy life.

**12.** Older people spend lots of time with children. They work in the church nursery, vacation Bible school and children's church. They spend private times with neighbor children, poor children and their own



grandchildren. They take them on trips, to private lunches or on outings to places like the zoo.

**13.** Older people manage stress. They look upon every crisis as a learning experience. They welcome personal criticism. They never, never "wear their feelings on their sleeve."

**14.** Older people develop loving, honest, supportive relationships. They are members of a small group or home church and share their lives and problems honestly with other members of the group.

**15.** Older people are servants, going out of their way to serve old people, children, young couples, the homeless and less fortunate. They volunteer for service positions in their church and community.

**16.** Older people have a healthy libido. If married, they remain sexually active all their lives. Abraham was 100 when his wife conceived Isaac. Despite all those horrible jokes, growing older doesn't mean growing impotent.

**17.** Older people are constantly seeking ways to deepen their relationship with God. They welcome advancing years as time to live a disciplined life in prayer and fasting. They expand their understanding of God through Bible study and travel to Bible lands and by entering into new spiritual ventures.

**18.** Older people are optimistic. They see life as a positive experience. Older people welcome problems as challenges to be conquered. They are strong risk-takers, unafraid of the threat of failure because of their deep faith in God. Old people are negative, always looking on the dark side of life. They whine and complain about the state of things.

**19.** Older people are generous with their money, time and experience. They delight in giving things away. But old people want to hoard.

**20.** Older people who love the Lord see death as the final goal of life. To them, the later years are a wonderful preparatory time for entering heaven in good health and anticipation. ■

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**Jamie Buckingham** is editor-in-chief of *Ministries Today* magazine and the author of more than 40 books. His latest is titled *The Truth Shall Set You Free...But First It Will Make You Miserable* (Creation House).