

You're Going to Get Old. Think About It Now

Many among the post-boomer set are anxious about their golden years. Early preparation will pay off later.



My father is 97. He says he's slowing down, but he still dresses sharp as a tack, follows politics and sports with unbridled passion and revels in the love of his family and friends, now spanning four generations.

I often contemplate what my father witnessed in life. He raised himself above the indignities of segregation. He fought fascism during World War II and injustice for the rest of his life. He marched on Washington in 1963 and a half-century later shook the hand of the first African-American president. My father also grieved

the bolt-from-the-blue, far-too-early death by stroke of his wife and first love—my mother—and then at age 90, found love again.

My father didn't plan to get this old, or do it so nobly. As he puts it, he was just trying to pay the bills. His now-grown grandchildren, my two sons and a daughter, won't have that luxury. They'll need lots of active planning for old age, and it's best they start now.

My generation, the "boomers," has dominated the stage in

defining how to age (or remain in denial about it). It's high time to also engage the next generations much more fully in thinking about and planning for aging. Let's face it: Boomers are entering their senior years as the largest, richest, most influential age wave in human history. Many of us will have the health and resources to pursue marvelous new options in retirement, or even to continue working if we love our vocations.

We boomers will also directly benefit from the fast-approaching golden age of elderly health. A host of on-body diagnostics will

be our guardian angels. New medicines and vaccines will be precisely tailored to our genetic makeup. Innovations ranging from artificial joints to self-driving cars will offset our human frailties. For the most part, my generation will live longer, better lives than my father's.

But what about the children? Right now, getting old is the last thing on their minds. They are busy buying homes, launching careers and starting families. They are coping with the challenges of young adulthood and enjoying the benefits—vigor, mobility and limitless dreams.

When it comes to aging, though, my children are likely to see a future much different from mine, starting with scientific breakthroughs that radically redefine "lifespan." For my children, 120 may be the new 80. They are already seeing the end of social concepts that we boomers took for granted, among them secure jobs, often with pensions.

Pressed, my children already admit to some trepidation about getting old. They are not alone.

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According to surveys sponsored by Pfizer and our partners in the "Get Old" campaign—which redefines being old as a time of new beginnings—about seven out of eight Americans harbor at least one serious fear about aging, a fear that may exceed that of death itself. These fears range from declining physical ability to running out of money. The American Psychological Association reports that younger Americans, like my millennial children, often believe their experiences with aging will be worse than those of the generations before them.

The good news is that many fears about getting old can be assuaged by modest planning and steady action. It's never too late to begin, but it's ideal to start in young adulthood. Stopping (or even better, never starting)

smoking, getting regular exercise and moderating one's diet—these all carry lifelong benefits. Prevention, early diagnosis and uninterrupted treatment of chronic diseases can extend life and keep elderly people above the "disability threshold" that makes a huge difference in the quality of their lives. We've already seen what the potent combination of healthier living and medical innovation can do. America's death rates from heart disease, stroke and cancer are all down more than 20 percent over the last two decades. Much more progress can be made.

It's time for Americans of all ages to get serious about getting old, because getting old is seriously different from what it was for their parents. It's time for a new mindset when it comes to aging and life stages. By overcoming fear and opening ourselves to the possibilities, there is much we can do, individually and collectively, to improve the odds that old age will be a new stage of growth. Whether we are talking about my generation or those to follow, the earlier and more earnestly we start to get serious about old age, the better. When it comes to getting old, let's all feel the fear—and do it anyway.

For more information on planning for old age, visit GetOld.com



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