



CC Image courtesy loondiver on Flickr

Baby Boomers Aging Well

By Bonnie Jean Teitleman

Statistics

Baby Boomers are people who were born in the twenty years following the end of World War II, i.e. between 1946 and 1964ⁱ. Boomers now range in age from 51 to 68. By 2029, 20% of the US population will be over age 65. According to CNN, there were almost 77 million Baby Boomers in the US in 2011ⁱⁱ. By 2056, there will be more people over age 65 than under age 18. The older Boomers are now retiring and looking at perhaps another 20-30 years of living, given the increasing life expectancy of Americans.

This essay considers how Boomers can live as well as possible.

Examples

Carrie is a 52 year old widow. Her husband died 3 years ago of cancer. Carrie is significantly overweight and now has Type 2 diabetes in addition to her fibromyalgia, depression and fibroids. She has been on disability for several months for an acute condition. Carrie is estranged from her only sister. Her two daughters have moved out of state and she relies on her sister-in-law as her primary support as she has few friends.

Sarah is a 60 year old married, successful professional woman. She wears expensive designer clothes and a long hair style similar to her daughter's. She recently attended an event wearing a strapless dress and high platform heels.

Jim is a 58 year old gay man in a 30 year relationship. He has worked diligently at his career, where he is much loved by his colleagues. Jim loves to eat and frequently meets friends for a meal. He swims several times a week and volunteers at an AIDS organization.

Who

Baby Boomers, born after the sacrifices of the Greatest Generation, have a reputation for being self-absorbed and more concerned about their personal gratification rather than the needs of others. Baby Boomers took pride in their youth and vigor and resisted the idea of growing old. They have embraced self-actualization in growth, pursuit of new skills and social networks, creativity and moral ideals. Plastic surgery, joint replacement, hair dye, drugs to enhance sexual vigor, and cosmetic dentistry are a few of the ways Boomers have tried to retain their youthful appearance and function to disguise their aging.

Dr. Atul Gawande, author of *Being Mortal*, describes physical and emotional changes of aging in people over time. In physical aging: “No single disease leads to the end; the culprit is just the accumulated crumbling of one’s bodily systems while medicine carries out its maintenance measures and patch jobs.”ⁱⁱⁱ He notes that, socially and emotionally, priorities change in the second half of life. People “narrow in” and may spend less time and energy on achievement and expanding social networks. They may prefer spending time with family and friends to meeting new people. He cites the work of Laura Carstensen, a Stanford psychologist who has found that “people reported more positive emotions as they aged . . . they become less prone to anxiety, depression and anger.”^{iv} Although aging brings challenges, people may be happier, more content and have a more positive attitude.

Issues and Concerns

What can we learn from research in aging that will help today’s cohort of Baby Boomers?

George Vaillant, a Harvard psychiatrist who has spent his career studying adult development, has written a book, *Aging Well (2002)*, in which he looks at the life choices, health and happiness in hundreds of individuals. From his work, he has determined that individual life choices may play a greater role than genes, money, race or other factors in how happy people are in their later years. He offers suggestions about lifestyle changes that can contribute to a better life as we age. He based his work on the Study of Adult Development at Harvard University, which consisted of followed three cohorts of 824 individuals for more than 50 years.^v

Dr Vaillant found that objective good health was less important than subjective good health, that it is acceptable to be sick as long as one doesn’t *feel* sick. One is born with genes, but moderation in diet, exercise and substance use can reduce wear and tear on tissues and organs and increase life expectancy. Regular preventive medical care is important to detect and treat problems as early as possible. He consistently found that warm, close relationships, empathy for others and the capacity to adapt to change are more important than one’s physical constitution, economic status and social advantages.

The *Wall Street Journal* on April 7, 2015 reported on two studies that showed that people who frame events in their lives in positive ways have better mental health. These studies, which involved adults in mid- to-late 50s, demonstrated that people with flexible and positive personal narratives, i.e. the stories they told themselves, were happier. Experiences can be

viewed in many ways. One man, for example, who was passionate about a triathlon, suffered a heart attack. Over time, he was able to re-frame his story: “I am upbeat that the closing of the triathlon door opens up a whole bunch of new ones.”^{vi}

According to Dr. Gawande, “People are putting aside less in savings for old age now than they have at any time since the Great Depression”^{vii}, often with vague ideas of inheriting wealth or getting by on their Social Security and retirement plans. The good news is that we are living longer. The bad news is that we will have to pay for it. Jim Morrison, that Baby Boomer icon of the Doors, said “No one here gets out alive.”^{viii} Deterioration, decline and disease will inevitably claim us all on the journey, but we can make the trip better.

What are strategies that Baby Boomers can use to age well?

- **Physical well-being.** After choosing your parents, avoid smoking and practice moderation in food, alcohol and exercise. Seek regular, preventive medical care.
- **Emotional well-being.** Cultivate optimism, resilience and flexibility as life brings its challenges. Strengthen your capacity to cope with life’s vicissitudes by continually evaluating your maturity and adjustment. Adapt rather than resist changes. As Dr. Vaillant recommends: “If you have a lemon, make lemonade”^{ix}. Get help if you are troubled by depression, anxiety or lingering grief. Try to avoid being lonely and bored.
- **Social well-being-**Make and maintain friends and family relationships, especially the closest ones. Find time to nurture older and younger people. Try to belong to a community or neighborhood where you encounter a variety of people of different interests.
- **Intellectual well-being.** Brains have plasticity throughout the lifecycle and continue to develop if they are used. Many people who are mentally active have a lively interest in ongoing learning, which is reflected in the growth of continuing education programs in local colleges and universities. BU has Evergreen, Harvard has the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement and Brandeis has the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (BOLLI). Find a way to stimulate your brain that pleases you.
- **Spiritual well-being.** Being aware of your inner life relationship to the world can be achieved through religion, meditation, reflection or connection with nature.
- **Financial well-being.** Understanding and using money wisely over time may ease the discomforts and anxiety of not having enough for old age.
- **Courage.** Dr. Gawande describes courage as the “strength in the face of knowledge of what is to be feared or hoped.”^x Finding the courage and strength to cope with fear, pain and loss may not be easy as life “narrows in” but it certainly helps.

How are Carrie, Sarah and Jim coping with their advancing years?

Carrie has lost her husband but not found emotional resilience and support to accept the loss and move on, accommodating to the change. She has developed medical conditions that may be a function of her lifestyle. She has few social supports and remains pessimistic about her future. Carrie might seek professional help to improve her health, lose weight, and reduce her

depression. She might join a bereavement group or social organization to increase her interactions with people.

Sarah may have some denial about how she looks in attire better suited to a younger person. She might consider asking a good friend or stylist for their opinion. She could look more youthful by trying to look as well as possible for the age she is instead of the age long past.

Jim is well positioned as he gets older with a supportive partner, a rewarding career and many friends and family. He has exercised moderation in his lifestyle. He may have an easier time than Carrie.

At the end of the day, some Boomers have matured and will adapt to aging with wisdom and grace, while others will chase the elusive fountain of youth.

Resources

BU Faculty Staff Assistance Office. Confidential consultation, counseling and referrals to community resources

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal*, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014.

Vaillant, MD, George. *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 2002.

Zemke, Ron, Raines, Claire, Filipczak, Bob. *Generations at Work*, American Management Association, New York, 2000.

ⁱ "Baby Boomers." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_boomers>.

ⁱⁱ Baby Boomer Generation Fast Facts - CNN.com. (2014, September 1). Retrieved April 27, 2015, from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/06/us/baby-boomer-generation-fast-facts/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. New York. Metropolitan, 2014. 28. Print.

^{iv} Ibid. 94

^v "Department Of Psychiatry - Harvard Medical School - Research." Web. 27 Apr. 2015.
<<http://www.hms.harvard.edu/psych/redbook/redbook-family-adult-01.htm>>.

^{vi} Bernstein, Elizabeth. "It's Healthy to Put a Good Spin on Your Life." WSJ. 6 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.
<<http://www.wsj.com/articles/its-healthy-to-put-a-good-spin-on-your-life-1428338415?>

^{vii} Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. New York. Metropolitan, 2014. 36. Print.

^{viii} <https://www.thedoors.com/discography/songs/five-one-613>

^{ix} Vaillant, George E. *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2002. 206. Print.

^x Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. New York. Metropolitan, 2014. 231. Print.