



A Silver Lining

The benefits that come with age are many. We need to start cultivating them now.

By Dan Gordon '85

THE BITTERSWEET OBSERVATION that “youth is wasted on the young” stems from the belief that the biological advantages conferred on us in our earlier years — sharper cognition, more energy, no wrinkles! — come at a time when we lack the perspective and wisdom to make the best use of them.

Alan Castel, a UCLA professor of psychology, views this paradox from a glass-half-full vantage point. In his 2018 book, *Better With Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging*, he argues that although older adults might yearn for the vigor of their youth, the gains that age imparts can more than outweigh the losses.

Castel suggests that those who do it well — remaining productive and mentally fit while finding meaning — tend to feel more confident and better able to focus on the positive aspects of their lives. “Many people say old age is better than they thought,” Castel says. “It’s a different kind of happiness. Sure, there are the aches and pains, but they no longer have the stress of earlier life, and they worry less about the things they can’t control.”

In the book, Castel relates insights from prominent figures who have aged successfully, from Maya Angelou and Frank Gehry to Bob Newhart and Vin Scully. He also cites hundreds of studies on the topic, including his own. He points to research showing that older adults — typically defined as those 65 and up — who are healthy and active report higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness than college-age adults.

ILLUSTRATION ALEXANDER GLANDIEN

“People are always looking for the fountain of youth — a way to prevent or disrupt aging,” Castel says. “A healthier approach is to respect it, understand it and realize that with some preparation in middle age, life can get better as we grow old.”

Indeed, Castel says, we should view our middle years as a time to take stock and retool in ways that will maximize the happiness and meaning we experience in late life. For Castel, three words constitute the ABCs of successful aging: active, balance and connection — each of which carries multiple and relevant connotations. He offers the following advice:

Keep Moving

“Active,” not surprisingly, starts with physical activity, which improves both cardiovascular and brain health (and if you exercise with a friend, bonus points for strengthening your social connections — but we’ll get to that). Castel points to several studies on the cognitive gains associated with walking, including one finding that older adults who walked for 40 minutes three times a week showed increases in the volume of the hippocampus, a key brain region involved in memory.

Do What You Want

Activity isn’t just about exercise, of course. Although research indicates that people who stay busy tend to age well, it’s not just about filling time. “There’s lots you could do to stay busy, but it has to be meaningful,” Castel says. “If you’re volunteering for an organization you feel passionate about, that’s likely to be more rewarding than simply doing something to keep yourself busy for a couple of hours every day.” In fact, Castel notes, freed from the massive time commitments that came with work and child-rearing earlier in life, older adults can pursue what they truly enjoy rather than spending each day checking items off their to-do list.

Hold Steady

“Balance,” too, is vital in more than one sense. Each year, more than 3 million older Americans visit emergency rooms because of fall-related injuries, potentially setting off a downward spiral that limits mobility and can compromise both cognitive and physical health. Balance exercises prevent falls, and it’s never too early to start, notes Castel, who, as part of his own training, stands on one leg each morning while brushing his teeth, pausing halfway to switch sides. (Check with a local hospital to see what kind of fall prevention classes it offers.)

Focus Wisely

There’s another important type of balance: As we get older, what are our priorities? Castel points out that

the definition of happiness itself often changes with the perspective that develops over the years. “As we age, we might begin to realize there’s a lot we can focus on that doesn’t make us happy,” he says. “That doesn’t mean we just ignore those things, but there’s some evidence that many older adults shift toward focusing on the positive rather than obsessing over what they can’t control, which can have a real impact on happiness.”

Cultivate Connections

And, finally, “connection.” In his book, Castel compares chronic loneliness to smoking cigarettes and obesity as known life shorteners. Often, he adds, when people retire, they’re struck by how much they miss the connections that come from interacting with the same people on a daily basis in the workplace. He advises taking measures at midlife to strengthen nonoccupational social ties. Become a regular at the local coffee shop, join a book group or running club, or merely shore up existing friendships. The point is to get involved in activities you enjoy, where the bonus includes being with people you enjoy. This brings Castel to the other important meaning of connection: Stay connected to what’s important to you. Cultivate and pursue your passions.

Stay Curious

Curiosity is also integral to mental fitness and successful aging. In his own research, Castel found that older adults responding to trivia questions remembered the answers to the questions they were most curious about, while tending to forget what they cared less about. The lesson is that remaining mentally stimulated is critical, but Castel warns against slogging through daily brain teasers as if it were a mental treadmill exercise. “Find the things that are rewarding as well as stimulating,” he says. “Reading books, traveling, learning a language, playing a musical instrument, talking politics with friends ... whatever piques your curiosity is going to be more important than trying to exercise your brain with a computer game.”

Take Heed

Of the many successful agers Castel interviewed for the book, one of his favorites was the late John Wooden. After a few questions, Castel cut to the chase: “What’s the secret?” The legendary UCLA basketball coach was both sage and concise. “He said the two most important things in life are love and balance — find who and what you love, and achieve balance in your life, both mentally and physically,” Castel recounts. “I think that’s a good summary. And he lived to be 99.”

“Aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been.”

— DAVID BOWIE