

## Fear of Aging Can Be A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Many of those in the current generation of older people were roused to action in their youth by Franklin Roosevelt's cry that "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Once again it is time to heed this bold truth when faced with the fear of aging. In fact, we at the Bedford Council on Aging have found that the fear of aging, generally based on myth rather than fact, is one of the greatest barriers to a healthy, fulfilling later life.

For most of us, our views of older age come from our experience of our own grandparents many decades ago and the media. Unfortunately, neither of these sources offer accurate information about aging as it is today. Only one of twenty elders currently live in a nursing facility and only one in two will ever have even a short stay at any time in their lives. While most people over 65 or 70 have some chronic illness, the vast majority are able to overcome these challenges to live independently by making adaptations and receiving a variety of services. In fact, the rate of disability is actually decreasing among older people as better medical care and health behaviors lead to a much longer period of older age without debilitating illness.

The facts are that for most people modifying behavior leading to ill health and putting into place services to assist in remaining independent as they are needed can result in many years, and even decades, of later life lived with joy and well being. For confirmation of the potential joys of later life, Bedford residents have only to look at the many older people who make our Town government work, who give of themselves through volunteering through the schools, or a religious or non-profit organization, who fix their own roofs at 90, and who write poetry and paint paintings at any age.

How can the fear of aging interfere with a good older age? First, those who are afraid of their own aging tend to believe that once they pass some magical birthday, their value, their intelligence and abilities, and their self-image of themselves simply vanish. Viewing themselves as obsolete and incompetent, they create this very situation by no longer participating in paid or volunteer work after retirement, by not making the effort to visit with friends or family, and by losing touch with what is going on in the world. All these can lead to depression which, research has shown, is one of the main reasons why elders become physically frail.

Worse yet, those who fear their own aging may assume that every new symptom is part of an inevitable decline and, instead of getting the medical care needed, let what could have been a small problem become one that leads to lifelong debility. Sometimes elders also avoid receiving medical care because they are afraid to find out that their symptom is associated with aging. The facts are that the risk of many medical conditions certainly rise with older age. However, all symptoms should be evaluated and, if appropriate, treated. Many of the problems many people believe are just a part of aging and therefore not worth discussing with their doctor -- including incontinence, confusion or dementia, and fatigue, among others -- may be more prevalent in older people but are not the result of aging and can be managed or cured.

Fear of aging can also cause people to avoid doing things that will prevent or manage debilitating conditions. Not every 65-year-old can take an aerobics class meant for those

in their 20s, but at the Council on Aging we have a number of fitness classes geared to a variety of levels of functioning. Those participating have credited the classes with reducing the number of falls they have, making it possible for them to cook and clean for themselves at home, and generally enhancing their mobility and stamina. We have other activities to stretch and invigorate minds, including art and computer classes, book groups, volunteer opportunities, and informational programs on legal and financial issues, among others. Not attending a program that interests you because it is at a place whose name contains the word “aging” simply deprives you of enjoyment, the chance to meet people, and the opportunity to keep your mind and social network lively.

Finally, giving in to the fear of aging prevents people from participating in reminiscence, that most important task of later life. Each season of life has its special activities, and for later life this includes thinking about the past, putting old hurts and victories into perspective, and creating from memories the story of one’s life. Those who refuse to look back because they are afraid of looking ahead can never complete this reminiscence that is so important to both the elder and their families, who need an understanding of their family history to move forward into its future. At the Council on Aging we offer many opportunities that lend themselves to reminiscence, including writing groups, journaling workshops, art exhibits, and programs about local history.

Finally, the fear of aging removes us from contact with a most vibrant and special part of our community. Those who fear aging tend not to want to have contact with those they consider to be old, whether at the Council on Aging, their neighbors, or others in the community. This is a time, however, when the generations must come together to support one another, whether through neighbors providing services to enable an elder to remain at home, to offer informal help to working parents whose children may be home alone, or to come together at a time of crisis.

The inevitable result of turning 60, 70 or 80 is not frailty, confusion and losing your purpose in life. Don’t let this belief and the fear that comes with it make you miss your opportunities for a healthy, fulfilling later life. The Bedford Council on Aging invites you to explore the many ways we can assist you to maintain your well being and enrich your later years. Feel free to call us at 781-275-6825 weekdays between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Saturdays from noon to 4 p.m. to find out what we can offer.