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Robert Brounstein

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Not that long ago, my iPhone flashed a news headline about the importance of aging well. Aging well is a topic that so many Americans seem to be having an increasingly growing interest; probably because so many baby-boomers are reaching that stage where going to see the Rolling Stones or Doobie Brothers means getting around with the assistance of wheel chairs and walkers! Nevertheless, while reality may be staring many of us mature folks in the face, take solace in the fact that – contrary to myth- the elderly has much to offer our society in the way of experience, knowledge and wisdom – things that can only be obtained by having lived a full life while having been around the block more than a few times.

How aging Americans maintain their value depends a lot on how well they maintain their health. Here are some priceless words spoken many years ago:

“Even in old age, exercise and moderation can preserve something of young vigor,”

That was said by the Roman philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who, according to historians, made this remark in 44 B.C. And since then, research into the importance of exercise for good health and longevity has confirmed this testimony.

Today, 15 percent of all Americans are sixty-five or older, and by 2030 that number will reach 20 percent. This isn't a temporary bump caused by the aging of baby boomers. It's primarily the result of major public-health achievements that, over the past century, have added more than three decades to the average American lifespan. Many people are now living well into their eighties or nineties, which means there is an entirely new stage of life to explore. It's amazing. It's what we always wanted: for everybody to live longer. And yet we've declared it a disaster — “Oh, no, we can't afford it; how terrible to have all these old people around.”

It's no great revelation, but our newly discovered longevity does require an examination (and possible tweaking – according to many economists) of our current Social Security and Medicare programs as more people will be relying on their benefits. But experts in the subject of future finances firmly believe that the situation can be addressed through re-evaluating and establishing feasible monetary adjustments; such as modifying the eligibility ages for many of these social programs.

One of the biggest myths about an increasing older generation in a society is the attitude that older people represent a financial burden on society. According to Linda Fried, Dean of Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, psychological research has shown that older people have a strong desire to make a difference in the world. Many of them are eager to remain involved in work or in volunteer activities. For instance, there are a number of programs in which older people can serve in public schools to improve children's success. Today, one such program - Experience Corps - includes two thousand volunteers tutoring thirty thousand students a year in twenty-one US cities. And those children of participating schools earn better grades, have fewer behavior problems, and are more likely to go on to complete high school. The volunteers benefit, too, in terms of both their physical and mental health.

Researchers in the area geriatrics have found that workers in many industries continue to be productive well past the age of sixty-five and that the wealth of experience they bring into the



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workplace improves a team's performance. This is true in a range of settings, from white-collar workplaces to production lines. One study in a German automobile factory showed that employees on a production line make fewer mistakes if the team is multigenerational. And some big corporations, like CVS drugstores and Fidelity Investments, have recruited older people because they realize that older customers prefer discussing their health needs or retirement plans with people closer to them in age. And many small companies, where there can be a high turnover rate, are hanging on to older workers because they value their institutional knowledge and experience.

One of the biggest breakthroughs in the field of gerontology in recent years has been how surprisingly resilient our minds and bodies are. For instance, scientists at Columbia University have demonstrated that we can continue to improve our cognitive abilities until very late in life; even accessing and strengthening parts of our brains that we'd long left dormant. At the same time, many of the physical ailments that are associated with aging — weight loss, muscle weakness, exhaustion, slow walking, and balance problems, along with heart disease and stroke — are not an inevitable part of growing old, as physicians used to think, but are preventable.

Of course, there are many factors that influence the quality of our mature years. These include genetics, not smoking, quality of health care, diet and social engagement. However, as Marcus Tullius Cicero recognized two thousand years ago, recent studies have confirmed that adequate exercise helps protect against numerous age-related conditions including heart disease, sarcopenia (the loss of muscle associated with aging), cancer, obesity and loss of cognitive function. The single most important thing a person can do as he or she gets older is to remain physically active. Diet is important too, but physical activity is crucial. Exercise is the closest thing we've found to a magic pill for combating the effects of aging. That's because it works on every physiological system and keeps your entire body fine-tuned. It even stimulates your brain and helps to prevent cognitive decline.

Nevertheless, there are certain health conditions that require more than just good, consistent exercise to maintain a vibrant quality of life. The fact is, as the aging population of the United States grows, recent studies from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that from 2014 to 2060, there will be a 178% increase in the number of Americans who have Alzheimer's disease and other related dementias.

So, as a reality check, reaching our Autumn years is, indeed, a whole new stage of living that was once thought to be a rarity and is now common. Yet, as we get older, there is a greater susceptibility to many health conditions. And research needs to lead the way. Nevertheless, older Americans can take the initiative and strive for a life style that can assist in the prevention of many diseases: The most convincing evidence is that physical exercise helps prevent the development of Alzheimer's or slows the progression in people who have symptoms. Many experts tout that a Mediterranean diet is great for maintaining good health. This includes fruits and vegetable, olive oil instead of butter, using herbs and spices instead of salt, eating fish and poultry instead of red meat AND yes – drinking red wine in moderation. Other important aspects include getting enough sleep and continue to learn new things while maintaining social contact with others. All wonderful therapies to help prevent Alzheimer's disease as well other dementia-related illnesses.

We don't stop playing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop playing - George Bernard Shaw.

