

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Old Dogs Can Learn New Tricks

In the words of George Burns, "you can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old." Most of us think of aging as something that only affects us as we reach middle age. In reality, aging is part of life. It starts when we are born and is part of the maturation process. An important task as we grow older is to recognize the changes that are a normal part of aging but, as George Burns hints, finds ways to avoid 'getting old'. Unfortunately, our culture and language tend to focus on the negative aspects of aging. How often have you heard the expressions "having a senior moment" or "over the hill?" The truth is that many older adults are living healthy, happy and productive lives. These folks have successfully adapted to the changes of aging; and, more importantly, maintain a lifestyle that helps to slow the aging process – they have found the ways to avoid 'getting old'.

In order to age successfully, it is important to understand what is 'normal aging' and what we can do minimize the effects of aging. As we grow older, our basic needs do not change; needs such as: secure housing, financial security, good health, good family relationships, and a sense of self worth. As we age, however, our ability to meet those needs may be affected by changes that we experience as part of the aging process. Although people age at different rates and in different ways, there are some emotional, social and physical changes that most people experience as part of the aging process. (To rate your 'Aging IQ' go to the National Institute on Aging website www.niapublications.org/tipsheets/agingiq.asp and take the *Aging IQ* quiz)

Loss is a prominent theme as we grow older – loss of social status and role as a result of retirement, loss of income level, physical changes, and of course, loss of loved ones. As we grow older, a spouse, older relatives or friends may die. When this happens, it is normal to grieve; but for some folks, such losses lead to increased isolation, loneliness and even depression. However, depression is **not a normal part of growing older. It is an illness, just like diabetes or arthritis. If you find yourself feeling lonely and sad all the time, telling someone is the first step to feeling better. Your doctor is an ideal person to talk to because he or she is already familiar with your medical history. You could also tell a friend, family member, neighbor, or clergymen about your feelings of loneliness and despair. Additionally, there are Mental Health Clinics in the majority of all VA facilities, as well as Mental Health Clinics in the community, which specialize in treating people with depression. To deal with the sense of isolation and loneliness that may arise as a result of loss as we grow older, it is important to keep active and involved in life. Consider volunteering at a VA facility, or an organization in your local community. Many social organizations could not function without volunteers so your time is very valuable. Take up a hobby that you considered before but never had the time to pursue; take a course offered by a local college; or adopt a pet. Pets provide companionship and unconditional love. These types of activities prevent us from 'getting old' by keeping us motivated, connected and future oriented.**

Loss of our role in life related to loss of a life-long career such as a military career is also a significant part of aging for some folks. If work defines our identity and is the main activity that provides us with sense of value and self worth, then retirement may bring on feelings of worthlessness. However, just because we are not productive in a 'job' does not mean that our worth as human beings has decreased. Remember this from a previous article I wrote: 'if you're reading this article, then you are probably a retired military service member'; which, in itself, has earned you ongoing value and worth. Along with loss of role, retirement also usually means decreased income. This is a reality of life. Ideally, by the time that we retire; most of our major expenses - such as our house mortgage, vehicles, and children's college education - have been paid. If not, these expenses will need to be considered as part of our planning for retirement. Retirement planning is a very important part preparing for life as we age whether we had a civilian career or military career. Retirement planning should begin early, and intensify as you move toward your retirement years. Determine whether your assets and income sources will provide you with what you want in the future. If not, create a plan to reach your financial goals. Just as other losses of later life can be compensated for, the effects of job and income losses can be mitigated. Of course, retirement doesn't have to mean 'not working'. You may choose to transition into a less stressful career or part time work. The key is to keep active and productive in whatever you choose to do after retirement.

Physical changes are also an inevitable 'loss' as we grow older. Vision changes may make us wish that our arms were longer. There are often changes in hearing acuity, which can cause barriers to communication with friends and family members. There may be decrease in strength and agility and the ability to 'get around' like we did when we were younger. For some folks, the physical losses can result in decreased involvement in usual activities and social connections, which may add to a sense of isolation and loneliness. However, these reactions are not a 'normal part' of aging. Several studies have shown that most seniors are still satisfied with their lives despite physical losses and physical ailments. As with other losses of aging, we can learn to compensate for physical changes so that we can continue to be active and maintain our connections. It is important to keep in mind that people with friends tend to be happier than those without, even if they have good family relations.

One of the key strategies to lessen the impact of the physical effects of aging and other losses of aging is the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. Research has shown that people who have healthy lifestyles not only live longer than those who do not; but they also have better mental abilities, fewer health problems, and fewer disabilities. Our lifestyle can help change our "fear of dying" to a "joy of living." Maintaining a healthy lifestyle includes not only a proper diet and physical activities but also mental activities or 'mental gymnastics'. Research has shown that an active mind can ward off illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Find something that is mentally challenging and fun to do on a regular basis. Consider computer games, crossword puzzles, reading, and other forms of brain fitness games to keep you sharp and alert. Our brain is like a muscle, the more we use it the better it functions.

In closing, consider this Chinese proverb: "Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still." Keep moving - old dogs can learn new tricks to prevent 'getting old'.