

Dear Age Sage,

Now that the weather is getting warmer, I am starting to see lots of people out walking, exercising, and playing games. Springtime used to be the time of year when I felt happier, healthier, and more motivated. But this year, I do not seem to feel the same. I still feel just as depressed as I did cooped up in my house alone on cold and snowy days. I recently turned 80, and I am moving a little more slowly these days. What can I do to stop feeling so down in the dumps?

Signed,
Still Sad in the Springtime

Dear Still Sad:

What you are feeling is very common. Many older adults feel that, in general, their happiness decreases with age. They often feel lonely, tired, and weighed down with worry or memories of perceived happiness from their youth. In fact as many as three out of 100 Americans over 65 suffer from clinical depression that has lasted two weeks or longer, and another 15% show some symptoms of mild depression. Perhaps because some believe depression is a normal part of aging, only 10% of these individuals get the help they need.

Dr. Jonathan E. Alpert, MD, PhD, Associate Director of the Depression Clinical and Research Program of Massachusetts General Hospital states, "In the past there was the presumption that depression was usual at this stage of life because of losses and social disruptions faced by many older people". He goes on to say, "Factors such as the death of loved ones, retirement and physical disabilities were blamed for mood disorders. Now we know this is not true: in fact, most elderly people who experience losses and disruptions do not develop major depression. Those who do need professional help".

Symptoms of major depression include feelings of apathy, sadness or hopelessness; changes in appetite and sleep patterns; anxiety, difficulty remembering or concentrating; fatigue; social withdrawal; difficulty functioning; loss of interest or pleasure in activities; aches and pains that don't respond to treatment; irritability; frequent crying; and thoughts of suicide.

Fortunately, in many cases, older adults think of themselves as happier than they were when they were younger. A New York Times article by Eric Nagourney from June 20, 2006 states that by the time people are older, they "are better equipped to deal with adversity." This makes being happy seem more accessible, since the wiser and more experienced someone is, the easier it is for that person to deal with any given situation. This is very encouraging to young people, as they envision themselves and how they might feel in the future.

So how do you become one of the older adults who think of him or herself as happy?

Dr. Alpert suggests the following:

- **Develop a sense of purpose** – Set new goals for yourself. Pursue meaningful activities such as caring for your grandkids, volunteering for a charity, or mentoring others.
- **Seek social relationships** – Stay in touch with old friends, and go out of your way to make new ones. Engage in activities that put you in touch with others, such as joining a sports club or team.
- **Prepare for life changes** – Plan how you'll spend your time after retirement, after the kids leave home, or after selling your home.
- **Stay as fit as possible** – Get plenty of sleep, eat well, and avoid smoking and abuse of alcohol or drugs. Learn relaxation techniques that can help you handle stress. Taking care of your health can help you avoid illness and disability that can lead to depression.
- **Commit to lifelong learning** – Be curious and explore. Take up a new language, hobby or craft, visit local museums and exhibits, or take nature walks.
- **Exercise** – Consult with your doctor about choosing a sensible fitness program and try to exercise for 30 minutes a day, four or five days a week. Exercise can head off depression and boost mood when you're feeling low.
- **Lean on others** – Share your troubles with family and friends, and ask for help if you need it.

TIP:

LIVING TO BE 100

An old woman was walking along the street when she heard a voice telling her..."You will live to be over 100." She looked around...but no one else seemed to have heard the voice. Then she heard it again, "You will live to be over 100." Again she looked around, and again, no one else seemed to have heard anything. Convinced it was The Lord telling her this, she made an appointment with a plastic surgeon, and signed up for a face lift, a tummy tuck, liposuction, breast implants, and a nose job, all to be done simultaneously. Figuring since The Lord told her she would live to be 100, she'd better do something to make herself look better.

After healing from all the operations and looking great she decided to go shopping. While crossing the street, she was hit by a bus and killed instantly. When she got to heaven, she asked the Lord, "Why did I die?" You told me I was

going to live to be more than 100?" God looked at her...and replied.... "Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't recognize you."

Until next month,

The Age Sage

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