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2010

## Positive Aging: Resilience And Reconstruction

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### Recommended Citation

Kenneth J. Gergen and M. Gergen. (2010). "Positive Aging: Resilience And Reconstruction". *New Frontiers In Resilient Aging: Life-Strengths And Well-Being In Late Life*. 340-356. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511763151.015  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/979>

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## 13 Positive aging: resilience and reconstruction

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*Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary Gergen*

### **Abstract**

From a social constructionist perspective, conceptions of aging emerge from participation in relationships. Thus, there is reason to counter the Western stereotype of aging as decline with a more robust and positive vision. In the same way, resilience in everyday life may be achieved by engaging creatively and collaboratively in coordinating the flow of circumstances and interpretations making up daily life. We illustrate the potentials of resilience in terms of collaborative attempts to generate positive reconstructions of what are often defined as debilitating circumstances: reduced income, diminished attractiveness in physical appearance, declining physical and mental abilities, physical handicaps, the “empty nest,” the loss of loved ones and approaching death. As we propose, sustaining a resilient orientation requires continuous improvisation, as one’s life conditions continue to change. By drawing on the resources accumulated over a lifetime, and collaborating with one’s contemporaries, culturally defined losses may be reconstructed and a positive confluence re-established.

As we look back at our lives, we both agree that when we were in our twenties and thirties, we had not looked forward to “growing old.” We never wanted to be identified as “old folks” and we did not look forward to “retiring.” Later we viewed with some distress the emergence of wrinkles and gray hair, and we hoped that every forgotten name was not a sign of dementia. It was not so much the signaling of oncoming death that was important in our age anxiety. Rather, as we have come to see, it is the fact that we would now be burdened with an onerous cluster of self-characterizations: declining, feeble, unproductive, over the hill, finished, powerless, irrelevant, unattractive, and so on. We scarcely feel we are alone in this vision of aging life; indeed, we believe that our anxieties merely reflected our participation in a culture of prejudice-at-large; we were victims of the pervasive American stereotype of aging as the worst period of life one could endure: decline, deficits, disaster, and death. We decided to fight back!

Although we can never scrape away the residues of cultural history, we believe we can generate more promising visions. This is the implication of the social constructionist perspective with which we approach research and practice in the social sciences (K. Gergen, 1994, 2009; K. Gergen and M. Gergen, 2000, 2004). From a constructionist standpoint, descriptions and explanations of the world are not demanded by the nature of the world itself. Rather, it is through the active negotiation and collaboration of people that such understandings are constructed. With regard to the concept of aging, constructionist theses are particularly catalytic. They unsettle the widespread tendency within the social and biological sciences to search for the naturalized life-course, that is, to chart the innate development and decline of human capacities over the lifespan (M. Gergen and K. Gergen, 2005). Rather, from a constructionist perspective, to find someone “old” and biologically or cognitively impaired, constitutes a collaborative accomplishment (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt, 1994; Hazan, 1994). There is nothing about changes in the human body that requires a concept of aging or of decline. In accord with Michel Foucault (1979), we propose that cultural constraints imposed on older people encourage them to accept themselves as undesirable, and thus delimit their own options for living. As research suggests, when one approaches aging as a burden, the lifespan is substantially shortened (Levy *et al.*, 2002). And it is when we avoid tendencies to naturalize that we begin to appreciate possibilities of a cultural transformation of aging (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003).

From this perspective, the negative definition of aging is neither objective nor immutable. Even the bulk of scientific findings that portray aging as decline are outcomes of a particular research orientation, driven by a value perspective that could be otherwise. If gerontologists view aging as decline, and are motivated “to help,” then the search is on to document such decline. And if this is the assiduous aim of research, one may always find such evidence. In this sense, the aging population has been the ‘victim of mis-measurement’ (Allaire and Marsiske, 2002). Additionally, whether a pattern manifests decline and how significant this decline is are matters of interpretation. Even the way in which science is produced creates the subject under study, in this case, aging. For example, with a large sample size, statistically significant differences do not necessarily mean that there are substantial differences between two groups; for reaction time, the differences could be significant, but very slight indeed (one or two seconds, perhaps), with a high degree of overlap between the two groups. In addition, issues of sample selection, variable naming, context familiarity, and researcher conduct with the participants all play a role in producing results that affirm forms of decline with aging.

In selecting a sample to study, how a researcher chooses participants is critical. Often college students, who are easy to obtain as participants in research, are compared with older people in the population. This biases the results toward those who are already pre-selected for certain desired traits in terms of cognitive abilities, for example. College students are also more familiar with experimental contexts, and they are not overwhelmed with uncertainty when entering into a laboratory or other research settings; older people may have difficulties in accomplishing tasks in a research study in part because of the context in which they are performing. It is quite possible that they have never been in a psychology laboratory before. Last, it is hard to overemphasize the significance of variable naming in interpreting the outcomes of studies. Whether a researcher calls a variable “dementia detector” or “forgetfulness,” for example, has consequences for how the research is interpreted. Variables do not “arrive” with names. The manner in which they are named is dependent upon the theoretical preferences of the researchers.

If nothing is demanded in the way we understand our world and self, what alternative can be generated to the common conception of age as decline? For us the answer is a vision of what we call positive aging. Specifically, we hope that our work can contribute to a vision of aging as a period of unparalleled development and enrichment (M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen, 2003). From a constructionist standpoint, the sense of the real and the good emerges from relationship. Thus, to establish an alternative to the traditional view requires a concatenation of voices. One form of giving voice is to develop resources in the media that are addressed to the general public and those who are professionally involved in working with older people. To achieve this end, we created the *Positive Aging Newsletter*, which is sent bimonthly and free of charge over the internet ([www.positiveaging.net](http://www.positiveaging.net)). The newsletter contains research summaries, news updates, book reviews, and other information and opinions. All the “voices” included in the newsletter challenge the common conceptions of aging as decline, and emphasize the various ways in which we may appreciate, embrace, and enjoy the fruits of this period of life (M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen, 2007). The newsletter goes out free of charge to almost 20,000 subscribers, and has stimulated volunteers to generate versions of the newsletter in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Chinese translations.

The success of the newsletter is, in part, related to the huge shift in the demographic constitution of populations in technologically advanced countries. To varying degrees, and as represented by the “baby boomers” in the USA, people aged over 55 are constituting larger and larger shares of the overall population. Because of changing economic patterns, begun

in the 1960s, this group of people is the wealthiest and most educated cadre of older people in the history of the world, and they are challenging the stereotype of negative aging in various ways (Dychwald, 1999). They are eager for the transformation in stereotyping that our newsletter, among many other resources, provides.

In the remainder of this chapter we shall develop the following themes: first, we shall propose a broad conceptual framework for understanding the condition of positive aging. This framework, which emphasizes a *confluence* (or a flowing with) approach to understand change, will enable us to move beyond the traditional accounts of cause and effect that prevail in contemporary explanations of human action. Having established this account of positive aging, as a condition of confluence, we may then move directly to the potentials of the resilience metaphor. As we shall propose, resilience is achieved by engaging creatively in the construction and reconstruction of the confluence in which one lives. We shall illustrate the potentials of resilience in terms of collaborative attempts to generate positive reconstructions of otherwise debilitating circumstances.

### Confluence and consequence

Within the Western cultural sphere, we inherit particular traditions of understanding people's actions. Most prominent within the social sciences is the narrative of *cause and effect*. As we understand it, people act in response to forces impinging on them. We believe that people can be "influenced," "educated," "rewarded," "threatened," or "forced" to change their behavior. In the social sciences we observe behavior we call aggressive, altruistic, or delinquent, and we ask how can we bring about more of one and less of another to improve the society. We pose questions such as the following: "What causes these behaviors?" What forces, influences, factors, or life situations bring them about? The question of cause then sets in motion mammoth programs of research. And in the area of gerontology, we conclude from such research that aging brings about changes in mental capacity, that helplessness causes depression, that marital accord increases the lifespan, and so on.

While having a measure of merit, the results of this linear form of explanation can also be paralyzing. We are invited by this tradition to see our actions as effects, the result of causal determinants lying outside our decision-making potentials. To view oneself as a mere effect is demeaning; one's agency is denied. Further, one is informed that there is little that can be done about the circumstances. If aging causes intellectual deficit, then "just get over it." If optimism brings about increased

longevity, and one is a pessimist, then so much the worse for you. The dice have been cast.

On philosophical grounds, the presumption of cause and effect has long been criticized. One of these critiques contains the seeds of an alternative and potentially promising form of explanation. Specifically, one cannot define a “cause” without specifying an “effect”; and conversely, there are no “effects” until we can locate a “cause.” If I wave my arm, and you point to a neural basis for this action, it is an effect; if you point to another’s greeting that follows, then it is a cause. Cause and effect, then, are mutually defining. Now expand the case: you are walking by a park and see a man throw a ball into an open space before him. An aimless activity, you surmise, scarcely notable on a summer’s day. Now, consider the same action when the ball is thrown to someone wearing a catcher’s mitt. Suddenly the individual’s action can be identified as “pitching.” In effect, there is no pitching until there is catching, and no catching until there is pitching. The acts are mutually defining or constituting. We look further to see that there is a man with a bat, bags that form a diamond shape, men holding mitts in the field, and so on. At this point we might justifiably conclude that this is a “baseball game.” Yet, following the earlier logic, each of these “independent” elements – the man with the bat, the bags, the men in the field – are not truly independent. They are all mutually defining. A man standing alone in the field wearing a mitt would not be playing baseball, nor would the bags constitute a game. Alone they would be virtually without meaning. It is when we bring all these elements into a mutually defining relationship that we can speak about “playing baseball.” Let us then speak of the baseball game as a *confluence*, a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining “entities.”

We may now apply this form of explanation to the condition of well-being in aging. Consider, for example, some of the familiar “causal agents” typically identified with such a condition: economic support, physical health, and a supportive social network (Argyle, 1999; Diener and Suh, 1999) If we consider them separately, we soon realize they are empty. The possession of money adds nothing to life without options for spending it; physical health owes its value importantly to the fact that there are significant activities in which one can engage; a supportive network of friends means little without the ability to relate with them. Each element within the confluence becomes what it is only in relationship to other elements. One may extend the analysis here by realizing that any “element” may also serve in more than one relationship. Most obviously, the availability of money may usefully contribute to many different conditions of positive confluence, such as living in a nice home, eating

well, traveling, going to cultural events, playing golf, giving a gift to a university, supporting one's children, and so on. Similarly, the joy of a good, heart-to-heart conversation is welcomed in many times and places. A good conversation may occur with significant as well as banal activities – entering into a new business partnership, becoming engaged to be married, washing dishes or raking leaves; these conversations can positively transform the activities of which they are a part. A combination of otherwise unremarkable activities may be placed in combination in such a way that the outcome is joyous. A frosty night, a fire burning in the fireplace, a book, and a glass of wine together may bring about a nourishing evening, where none alone would suffice. No single component is sufficient; it is the combination that brings satisfaction. In this sense, aging well is not a matter of understanding cause-and-effect relationships, but recognizing that it is the work of a chef folding together a myriad of different ingredients.

One may inquire at this point into the origins of confluence. How are satisfying forms of confluence brought into existence? Here it is important to return to the social constructionist orientation with which we began. As proposed, all that we take to be real, valuable, rational, or otherwise meaningful owes its origins to a process of relationship. Thus, when we identify “components” of the confluence and their mutually defining potentials we are doing so as participants in a set of relationships. We single out “money” as a component of the confluence by virtue of a tradition of relationship; the value that money acquires in terms helping us “do what we want to do” is again a matter of socially derived definition. A baby has no idea that a dollar bill is a medium of exchange, and not a “chewable.”

### **Positive aging and confluence**

The confluence orientation helps us to expand on the vision of positive aging. Essentially, such a condition of life may be viewed as one in which the mutually defining components enable one to participate in a process of continuing enrichment and development. To elaborate and clarify, it may be helpful to sketch out several major proposals that attend this view:

1. From the standpoint of confluence, it first becomes clear that there are no particular features of life that, in themselves, necessarily make a contribution to (or detract from) positive aging. In this sense, factors like health and wealth do not necessarily “determine” one's sense of well-being. Whether an identifiable feature makes a contribution depends on how it is mixed within the existing confluence. Thus, for example,

economic wealth is not required for there to be a positive confluence, although various studies of well-being in old age suggest that it is often a strong contributor (Diener, Diener, and Diener, 1995). Fully enriching lives may be lived with modest financial resources as well. Artists of every age often find a great deal of satisfaction in their lives despite meager incomes. If one is living a life centered around gardening or fishing, a bank account of millions may be far less relevant to one's well-being than the availability of sun, rain, and calm weather.

Generally, research indicates that being of good health is important in order for people to ascribe to themselves many positive attributes and a sense of well-being. Many studies also find that making changes in one's lifestyle, such as quitting smoking, enhances one's health and sense of well-being (Franklin and Tate, 2009). At the same time, people often adjust so completely to changes in their physical health that they no longer focus on the changes in their daily lives. The sympathy people feel for those who are less fortunate than themselves is often misplaced, and this sense of "false empathy" creates a misunderstanding about the nature of any contribution to the confluence related to positive aging.

2. What it means to age positively is both culturally and historically contingent. Different cultures and subcultures may vary significantly in how they define the components of a positive confluence and how they fit with one another. The relational traditions in which one participates lay the groundwork for defining a positive confluence. Ethnic, religious, economic, and political traditions are important forms that may differentiate the ways in which positive aging is defined; it clearly has an impact on national differences in subjective well-being (Diener and Suh, 1999). In some agrarian cultures, having sufficient children to care for one in one's old age is sufficient for positive aging. Having a proper burial site is an important aspect for positive aging among the Balinese. At the same time, that we have lived a life within a set of traditions does not necessarily seal the future. Transformation of cultural traditions is always possible.

3. Because we participate in multiple relations over the course of our lives, we enter the latter third of life possessing enormous resources for achieving a positive confluence. We may not always be aware of these resources; many are latent and many remain untapped. Thus, from various relationships over a lifetime one might come to value religion, rock music, yoga, junk food, fine jewelry, the circus, Picasso, romantic comedies, soccer, friendly arguments, opera, wine, gardening, helping others, political participation, and so on. With strong cultural definitions about the nature of positive aging, and broad social expectancies about behavior "appropriate for the age," many of these resources may either recede



from consciousness or be dismissed as inappropriate. If a condition of positive aging is generally defined as one of peace and tranquility, the pleasures of rock music, competitive athletics, and riding roller coasters may be viewed as relics of a past life. But, of course, for some people, peace and tranquility are not desired endpoints, but distractions from the excitement and challenge that they may wish. In certain respects, the confluence approach to positive aging shares much in common with the convoy model of social support. In this model, the emphasis is on the diverse social relationships that people have over the life-course, and that are more or less influential, depending on other circumstances that are present (Antonucci, Birditt, and Akiyama, 2008).

4. The possibility for being part of a positive confluence is importantly dependent upon one's capacities for improvisation. To illustrate, consider a couple who plan a picnic in the countryside. The day is beautiful, and a delicious meal is packed away in a basket. However, while ambling through the countryside, the sky turns gray, and soon they are threatened with rain. Their vision of a beautiful day is now in jeopardy. However, the couple spies a farmer's shed in the distance, and they arrive just as a downpour begins. Undaunted, they lay out their picnic on the floor of the shed, and as they listen to the rain overhead and enjoy what now seems a veritable banquet, they laugh and congratulate themselves on the success they have made of the day. This is the art of improvisation, and, in our view, one that is essential in sustaining a condition of positive aging. Thus, one may inherit from longstanding traditions many resources for achieving a positive confluence. However, the match between traditional conceptions and the vicissitudes of everyday life is highly variable. There are deaths, divorces, births, marriages, accidents, volatile trends in economic conditions, changes in one's neighborhood, challenges to one's health, and so on. To sustain a condition of positive aging in a constantly changing ocean of contingencies requires imagination and innovation.

### **Resilience, reconstruction, and relationship**

With the confluence orientation in place, we may explore the significant potentials of the resilience metaphor. Longstanding traditions of meaning-making provide the resources enabling people to create the sense of well-being in aging. However, it is the capacity to improvise that enables such patterns to be continuously reshaped as conditions of living change across time. At least one major threat to this process of reconstruction derives from what might be called "the concretization of the real." It is here that the traditions of what constitutes "the good life" are so fully solidified that the process of improvisation is impeded. "Saving for

retirement” is the most obvious example. We tend to view a certain level of retirement income as essential for positive aging. However, whether one’s savings match the constantly changing conditions of the economy is variable. Due to shifts in the stock market, costs of living, or health care costs, one’s savings may or may not be sufficient to maintain a condition that one continues to define as positive. Losses in physical health, close relationships, memory, and secure housing are also common challenges to the ease with which one may be resilient.

It is at this point that the reshaping of the confluence is required. One must be able to resist the traditional concretization of the good, and to generate alternatives that may restore the condition of positive aging. Herein lies the potential for revitalizing the confluence. There are not only the many and varied forms of fulfillment that we have known over a lifetime, but as well the many models to which we have been exposed. However, from a constructionist standpoint the greatest resource for resilience lies in the reconstructive potentials of dialogue. As we talk with one another, we share resources, make salient, long-forgotten resources, and garner support for wholly new amalgams. This strategy has gained importance in the last years as the market value of pensions and savings for retirement has dropped significantly.

The two of us have given many workshops on positive aging. To explore the potential contribution of dialogue to resilience, we have given small groups of participants the challenging task of locating or creating ways in which events that are commonly construed as age-related losses may be reconstructed. Among the topics these groups have been asked to address are declines in physical and mental abilities, chronic illnesses, retirement, lowered sexual interest, loss of income, diminished attractiveness in physical appearance, relocation, the empty nest, loss of friends or family through distance or death, and the increased proximity to personal death. In each case we have challenged the groups to locate the positive potentials of these events; we ask them: “Are there ways in which these conditions may be reconstructed in such a way that a sense of well-being may be restored?” We recognize that these are grave threats in many instances, and that this is no simple task for the groups to handle.

Yet we have been consistently amazed at the diversity of creative and emotionally stirring possibilities that emerge from these groups. As a preliminary example, the following is an extended account of how one participant narrated the onset of a chronic illness, namely diabetes:

At first I was shocked and dismayed that I had been diagnosed with Type II diabetes, at age 60, much as my mother had a few years before at 85. It shook my sense of who I was and created for me a vision my future – deprived for the rest of my life of the sweets and breads and wine that I loved. I was well-known

for my famous vodka crust pies and my biscotti, and here I was sentenced to a life of deprivation and denial. So with a heavy heart, I went on a low carb diet; much to my surprise and pleasure, I lost about 20 pounds of fat I had accumulated over the previous 20 years. For the first time in many years, I was enjoying wearing size 6 clothes, and I began to revel in my new body, my new fashions. I even went to an exclusive hairdresser and acquired a new hairdo, replacing the salt-and-pepper hair for a layered blond look. The need for exercise was paramount, and my daily exercise regime became an invigorating and relaxing time of day for me, especially because I had the chance to listen to my favorite music on my i-pod while I was on the treadmill. Another thing I began to enjoy was taking my neighbor's dog for daily walks. It turned out that I was an incredibly skilled dog trainer, and I reveled in the tricks my Maxwell learned, as I plied him with "yummies." During the walks with Max, I met a lot of other dog owners, and made new friends. One of them offered me her summer place at the shore where I could go to birdwatch, another of my hobbies that I had neglected over the years. Finally, I became closer to my mother. We support each other, and keep each other on track in our testing, eating and taking pills. We are closer than we have been in a very long time. And it turns out that I can still drink wine, and treat myself to the occasional biscotti. My friends still love my pies.

In the sections below, we share in brief form some of the major pathways to resilience as developed within these groups.

### **Reduced income**

Retirement typically brings less income, and one's savings may often dwindle as a result of inflation, stark market losses, and unanticipated crises in health or family matters. On one's own it is often difficult to reconstruct one's condition in such a way that it is positive in tenor. However, within the group situation numerous routes to resilience were generated. Among the prominent reconstructions:

1. More creativity and ingenuity are demanded, so that one can have the same pleasures at reduced cost. One can take pride in finding money saving ways to enjoy life.
2. Money does not buy happiness. The greatest rewards of life are found in relationships. The loss of income re-focuses one's life on what really matters.
3. Money brought with it a materialistic attitude toward life. Too many hours were absorbed with "getting and spending," as the poet said. Now there is openness to appreciating nature, music, art, and a spiritual life.
4. Without money we are not away from home so often. This gives us more quality time at home, in our neighborhood, and community.

5. Without a job, one can begin to remember other options in terms of career. The job one had was not necessarily the job one wanted. With some additional schooling, a new work life could be envisioned. Volunteering may be the avenue to a new work life.
6. Life becomes simpler, and there is a new tranquility.

### **Diminished attractiveness in physical appearance**

Many people are troubled by the deterioration in their appearance with age. They feel young at heart and mind, but their bodily appearance seems to be dragging them into old age. One research study indicated that, on average, people aged from 70 to 104 years felt about 13 years younger than they were, regardless of age, but when they looked in the mirror, they reduced the discrepancy to 10. Women, particularly, were less satisfied with their mirror images than men (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kitter-Gruhn, and Smith, 2008). For many this means a loss in self-esteem, and a diminution in their aspirations for a social life. At least one result is the massive investment in plastic surgery and anti-aging pharmaceuticals. In Phoenix, Arizona, for example, a participant in our workshop said: "It's not a matter of 'if' one has plastic surgery, but when."

However, besides the option of "fighting it," people may generate other routes to resilience:

1. One need not accept the definition of "good appearance" with being young. Change is not deterioration. It is a new look.
2. A new definition of beauty may be developed. As many participants noted, they are no longer drawn by youthful beauty. It is often associated with naiveté and narcissism. Rather, they are far more compelled by their older peers, whose appearance suggests sophistication and a deeper wisdom about relationships. As some participants proposed, there are new standards of beauty now being developed by the media. They portray gray hair, for example, as lovely and sexy. Others reject the idea of beauty as an external appearance. As one participant put it: "We must nurture the beauty within, and that will resonate with those who are willing to discover it."
3. The meaning of an aging appearance may also be transformed. As one participant voiced: "I think we should be proud of how we look. Honor our wrinkles. We lived a long time to get them."
4. One may also find relief from the demands of appearance. As one participant put it: "For me it is rather a relief not to have to pay so much attention to how I look. It can take a lot of time and money to look great."

### **Declining physical and mental abilities**

With increasing age, many people experience losses in various physical capacities (memory, dexterity, energy level, strength, etc.). These changes are often a matter of quiet frustration, and anxiety about the future. Within the group situation there are major resources for resilience:

1. We do not have to define these changes in ability as “losses.” Over the lifetime we are always changing, and this is natural. We don’t have to define some changes as gains and others as losses. Who has the right to impose such judgments?
2. We age within friendship and family groups, where everyone is changing. When we all share in the changes, we don’t really pay attention to them. We may feel we suffer memory loss. But in a group of elderly people, we laugh about memory loss.
3. There is a challenge here to do more in the way of physical and mental exercise. We can renew our vigor, improve our stamina, and be proud of what we have achieved.
4. There is pleasure to be taken in being a “couch potato.” As one participant in our workshops said: “After a life time of worrying about keeping myself fit for the job, and all the other responsibilities I have, it is a relief to relinquish the demands of being perfect.”
5. Such losses are often minor, and rather than fretting over them, we are invited to see the broader perspective on life. Who cares if one can’t recall every name, or read as fast, when there are such major challenges in the world in such matters as environment, religious conflict, and starvation?
6. The loss of physical abilities, they point out, can give rise to more frequent moments of tranquility, to a greater sense of personal skill as one finds ways to compensate for the deficit, and to the development of new and engaging hobbies or interests to replace the old.

### **Physical handicaps**

In its extreme form, the loss of ability becomes a physical handicap – for example, an inability to hear, to see, or to walk. There is abundant evidence suggesting that once people get over the shock and dismay of having a physical limitation, for example, breaking one’s neck and being unable to walk, they begin to focus their attentions on other matters. Thus, six months after sustaining a serious and perhaps permanent disability, their feelings of well-being are not so dissimilar to those

who do not have such disabilities. Whether they are feeling up or down about the weather, their love lives, financial status, work, recreational activities, and so on, they are much like anyone else (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). At the same time, many of the forms of resilience generated in the case of diminished abilities are also found in groups discussing physical handicaps.

Some of our respondents found positive alternatives in physical handicaps:

1. There is a certain freedom from demands, and a new sense of tranquility that can often be found. A patient in a social services group in Sweden rejected further therapeutic aid, saying that he enjoyed being lazy and that a therapeutic obligation could interfere with his desire not to become a productive worker in his old age. (See Håkansson, 2009, for a further description of this case.)
2. One can become heroic in bearing up under the limitations of a physical handicap. That is, the handicap becomes an invitation to achieve at an outstanding level. Such narratives have long served as a cultural resource, from Demosthenes to Lance Armstrong. (Demosthenes suffered from a speech defect, and went on to become a significant orator in ancient Greece, and Lance Armstrong, a cancer survivor, became the famous cyclist who won the Tour de France.)
3. Emphasizing the significance of relationships in generating resilience: there are increasing numbers of organizations in society that attempt to redefine handicaps in other than terms of loss. For example, organizations of the deaf, the blind, and the autistic define such conditions simply as differences as opposed to deficits. And, as they explore, there are many ways in which such conditions are superior to “the normal.” The people identified as part of the “Deaf Culture” consider their language and communication skills as superior to hearing people’s abilities in many ways.
4. Work to recreate the community and society more generally so as to accommodate physical changes. In general, within the past 20 years, as a result of the national Disabilities Act, all communities and institutions are required to accommodate wheelchairs in terms of access and the use of all facilities. David Myers, a psychologist from the University of Michigan, has become highly involved in changing the sound systems in airports and public buildings, especially concert halls, to accommodate hearing deficits (Myers, 2000). He, himself, is nearly deaf. With changes in the public sphere, so-called deficits are erased in terms of many functions.

### **The “empty nest”**

One of the most overwrought myths in the past 30 years, when the size of families has shrunk, is that “Mother” will become devastated and bereft after her children have flown the coop, and nested elsewhere. Although it is the case that losing one’s functional value is a threat, the prevalence of women in the workplace has allowed the parenting function to lose its singular status as the most significant role in most women’s lives. A few of the comments:

1. Given how busy life is anyway, having less housework and upkeep for children is a benefit not a curse.
2. Children are most loveable when they are no longer as dependent upon parents for sustenance and discipline.
3. Children actually don’t leave home. They rely on it, either in theory or in fact, and the problem then is how to make room for them on re-entry. A very different relationship has to be developed so that tensions do not erupt when old patterns arise.
4. The empty nest allows for the “love birds” to reconnect. This later notion has been substantiated by research on the positive impact of the “empty nest” on marriage (Gorchoff, John, and Helson, 2008).

### **Approaching death**

Death would appear to be a reality that resists reconstruction. Yet, when we take into account the views of death widely shared within various religions of the world, we do realize that death is not death is not death. We begin to see that the biological construction of death is only one, and to accept this definition is to strip the period of old age of its potentials. The loss of significant others is an increasingly frequent occurrence as people age. Studies of widowhood suggest that there are many ways of dealing with such losses, and no one developmental course is applicable. People do not necessarily adjust to their losses by giving up their bonds, but rather often seek to maintain their relationship to the dead person through “conversations” and other activities that are shaped by the preferences of the deceased spouse. Beyond simply coping and finding a way back to “normal,” Wortman and Silver (1993) suggest that bereavement can be an opportunity for growth and development. Widows, for example, often report that they have acquired new skills and are more competent in dealing in the world after the loss of their husbands. There are many cases in which the death of a spouse may bring a sense of relief.

There is an old Italian saying: “Every woman deserves to be a widow for five years,” suggesting that married life is a sacrifice for a woman. We share only a few of the resources for resilience developed by our groups:

1. There are good philosophic approaches to death, some from religion, others that view death as a normal part of the adventure of living. As one said: “Death can be the final adventure.”
2. Death is a transition from a “vale of tears” to a place of unending joy. Life is just a brief interlude from eternity.
3. Most common is the view that awareness of death invites a deeper appreciation of day-to-day life. One pays more attention to the small details, sights, sounds, smells. One appreciates more fully one’s friends and loved ones.
4. Death can be a peaceful event at the proper time; one may even prepare for it as one might write the final chapter of one’s life story.
5. We live beyond death through our legacy with our children and our good deeds.
6. Without death, life would go on and on in a formless state. One needs the exclamation point of death.

As a general surmise, it may be concluded that when asking the right question, people can locate means of transforming otherwise dire circumstances into acceptable, nourishing, and even joyful alternatives. The most important wisdom for growing old well may lie in the art of joining with others in posing positive questions (Adams, 2004; M. Gergen and K. Gergen, 2006).

For some people there are limits to achieving resilience, especially when the loss is new. To be sure, with time many happily married people who are widowed find another partner, in some sense, in order to continue the lifestyle they once had. Often, when long caretaking has occurred, one may be glad for an end to overwhelming demands and responsibilities. The release of a loved one from suffering is also regarded as a blessing. In many circumstances, however, people gain resilience by integrating the remnants of the terminated relationship into their continuing activities (Hedtke and Winslade, 2004; Stroebe *et al.*, 1992).

### **Conclusion**

In one sense the major message of this chapter adds new dimension to the old adage that aging is what we make it. As proposed, whatever happens to the body and to our behavior patterns over time has no intrinsic meaning; there is no condition that is necessarily good or bad. Whatever the meaning of our condition of life, it is generated within our relationships.



Within Western culture, there has been a strong tendency to view the latter third of life as one of necessary decline. As we propose, however, these same traditions can be mined for concepts and values that can transform the conception of aging. More specifically, with continuous construction and reconstruction of one's conditions, the latter years may become the most developmentally enriching period of life. To sustain this condition requires continuous improvisation, as one's life conditions continue to change. There are numerous culturally defined losses that attend the aging process. At the same time, by drawing on the resources accumulated over the lifespan, and collaborating with one's cohort, these age-associated losses may be reconstructed and a positive confluence re-established. Herein lies a major route to resilience.

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