

What is “Normal” Aging? – Presentation Notes

Introduction

Aging can sometimes be a scary thing – mostly because we do not always know how aging is supposed to progress. This lesson will cover “normal” aging, as well as discussing simple strategies you can do now to help you to continue aging successfully.

First & Foremost, there is no normal!

- One important thing you need to know is that there is no specific normal.
 - There are general bodily changes that occur across time – what we will cover today.
 - May happen sooner or later for some
 - May not happen in others
 - **Is there someone you remember who never seemed to age? Or aged rapidly?**
 - It’s a combination of genetics, our environment, and our own personal factors (diet, exercise, mental health, etc.)

Physical Changes

Let’s talk about some physical changes that can occur:

- The skin becomes thinner and more rigid
 - The collagen in the skin connect to each other and become more rigid, the skin becomes less flexible, losses elasticity
 - Bottom layer of skin begins to thin, becoming more transparent
- Hair “grays”
 - Strands begin to lose their color – do not turn gray, just look gray due to surrounding colored hairs
- Joints are less flexible
 - Cartilage that is protecting your joints begin to degrade in your 20s and 30s
 - Joints wear out from use.
- Trouble sleeping
 - Should be getting 7-9 hours of sleep
 - This is problem is linked to lifestyle factors and bodily changes
 - Changes in circadian rhythm – the natural process of your body releasing melatonin
 - Lifestyle factors include:
 - Stress
 - Obesity
 - Physical inactivity
 - Alcohol use
- Loss in touch differentiation
 - Have difficulty differentiating between two points of pressure (can feel them, but cannot tell which one you are feeling)



- Presbyopia (prez-be-oh-pee-a) – loss of ability to focus vision on near objects
 - Due to thickening and hardening of the lens – cannot adapt its shape for near objects
 - Fixed through reading glasses/bi-focals
 - Older adults are increasingly vulnerable to cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration
 - Cataracts: clouding of the lens
 - Glaucoma: Increased pressure inside the eyeball, resulting in nerve damage
 - Macular degeneration: Center of retina degenerates – resulting in a black spot in the center of your vision (rely on peripheral vision)
- Presbycusis (prez-be-cue-sis) – loss of high-pitched sounds
 - Degeneration in the cochlea or auditory nerve
 - Can also experience tinnitus – hear noises in your head even though there is no sound
- Gradual loss of smell
 - You constantly make new smell receptors, however area that contains the receptors shrinks (reducing number of available receptors)
- Changes in taste buds
 - Gradual loss in taste sensitivity
 - Sweet then salty, then sour, then bitter

Psychological Changes

- As we get older, we take longer to react – no more cat like reflexes
 - This is due to what is called the general slowing hypothesis – we just have a general decline in how long it takes to process information
- Attention can become more difficult – have difficulty keeping attention on a task for a period of time, multitasking declines
- Slight decline in executive functioning
 - Executive functioning is the mental skills needed to make decisions, plan, and use mental energy for a task
 - There is a slight decline in executive functioning because it draws upon some parts of memory and attention
- Slight memory issues
 - Older adults may have trouble remembering events that occurred long ago, difficulty with remembering names or words (tip-of-the-tongue), or remembering where you heard something (the source)
 - But there are several abilities that do not decline:
 - Remembering distinctive events that are different from other past memories (ex. JFK assassination)
 - Remembering word meanings or how to do something (like tie your shoes or ride a bike)
 - Remembering some information from your own past (typically between your 10s and 30s)
- Personality traits are stable.
 - There can be some slight changes in an individual's personality
 - If there is a drastic change, then something is wrong!

Social Changes

- It is not surprising to know that there are changes in family relationships
 - As children grow up, the relationship changes a bit
 - Becomes more friendly (in most cases) – have to navigate being parent to an independent adult
 - **Was this difficult for anyone?**
- There is a shift in the way we want to interact with society
 - Some individuals disengage from society – may stay at home and not really do much
 - Others may stay very involved – through work or volunteering
 - Either way is okay – it just depends on the person’s personality
 - If they chose to disengage, that is okay – do not push them to re-engage with society
- More selective with friendships
 - We all have had friends that we loved dearly and others that we wanted to see rarely.
 - As we get older, we put more emphasis on those friendships that provide more enjoyment
 - Time horizon – see how much time we have left in life
 - Don’t want to waste time being unhappy – focus on relationships that make us happy
- More and more older adults are going back to work or volunteering

What is not normal?

So far we have talked about some general bodily changes – these are not all of them. But what is not normal? The biggest thing that people are concerned about is their memory. We’ve talked about “normal” memory loss, but what does atypical memory loss look like?

Normal Forgetfulness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sometimes misplaces keys, eyeglasses or other items.• Momentarily forgets an acquaintance’s name.• Occasionally has to “search” for a word.• Occasionally forgets to run an errand.• May forget an event from the distant past.• When driving, may momentarily forget where to turn; quickly orients self.• Jokes about memory loss.

On the left you will see some normal things that we may forget about on a daily basis.

- **How many of us have walked into a room and forgotten why we walked in there?**
- **Or where we left our keys?**
- **Or our glasses?**
- **What other common things do we forget?**

On the right, you will see things that are not typical things we forget about:

- Things like who someone is (we may forget their name, but not that we don't know them).

A great example is that the difference between normal forgetting and dementia is the difference between remembering where the spoon goes and remembering what a spoon is.

Dementia

- Forgets what an item is used for or puts it in an inappropriate place.
 - May not remember knowing a person.
 - Begins to lose language skills. May withdraw from social interaction.
 - Loses sense of time. Doesn't know what day it is.
 - Has serious impairment of short-term memory. Has difficulty learning and remembering new information.
 - Becomes easily disoriented or lost in familiar places, sometimes for hours.
 - May have little or no awareness of cognitive problems.
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What can you do now?

So now that we've talked about what we can expect to happen, what can be done about it?

- Physically, you can do some strength or resistance training exercises.
 - Now don't worry, you don't need to go to a fancy gym to be able to do these exercises, you can do them in your own home!
 - Link to exercises: <https://www.silversneakers.com/blog/strength-training-for-seniors/>
 - For your joints, you can do flexibility training like stretching or yoga to help your joints.
 - You can take tai chi if you want to improve your balance as well.
 - Diet – be sure that you are eating healthy
 - We want to keep our bodies and our minds healthy
 - We need to make sure that we are taking in all the proper nutrients to keep ourselves healthy
 - Extension has numerous nutrition classes – also see your doctor for more specific information regarding your own special concerns
- Psychologically
 - Keep your mind engaged
 - If you don't use it, you'll lose it.
 - Always be learning new things – this is a great first step
 - Read the newspaper, books, etc.
 - Do crossword puzzles, word searches, anything to help keep your mind engaged.
- Socially
 - Stay engaged with family and friends.
 - Science has linked social isolation to health issues
 - Be sure that you are staying engaged as much as possible.

When in doubt, talk to your doctor!

If you are ever in doubt about any health concern that you may have, be sure that you reach out to your doctor!

References

Whitbourne, S. K., & Whitbourne, S. B. (2017). *Adult development and aging: Biopsychosocial perspectives* (6th edition). Wiley.