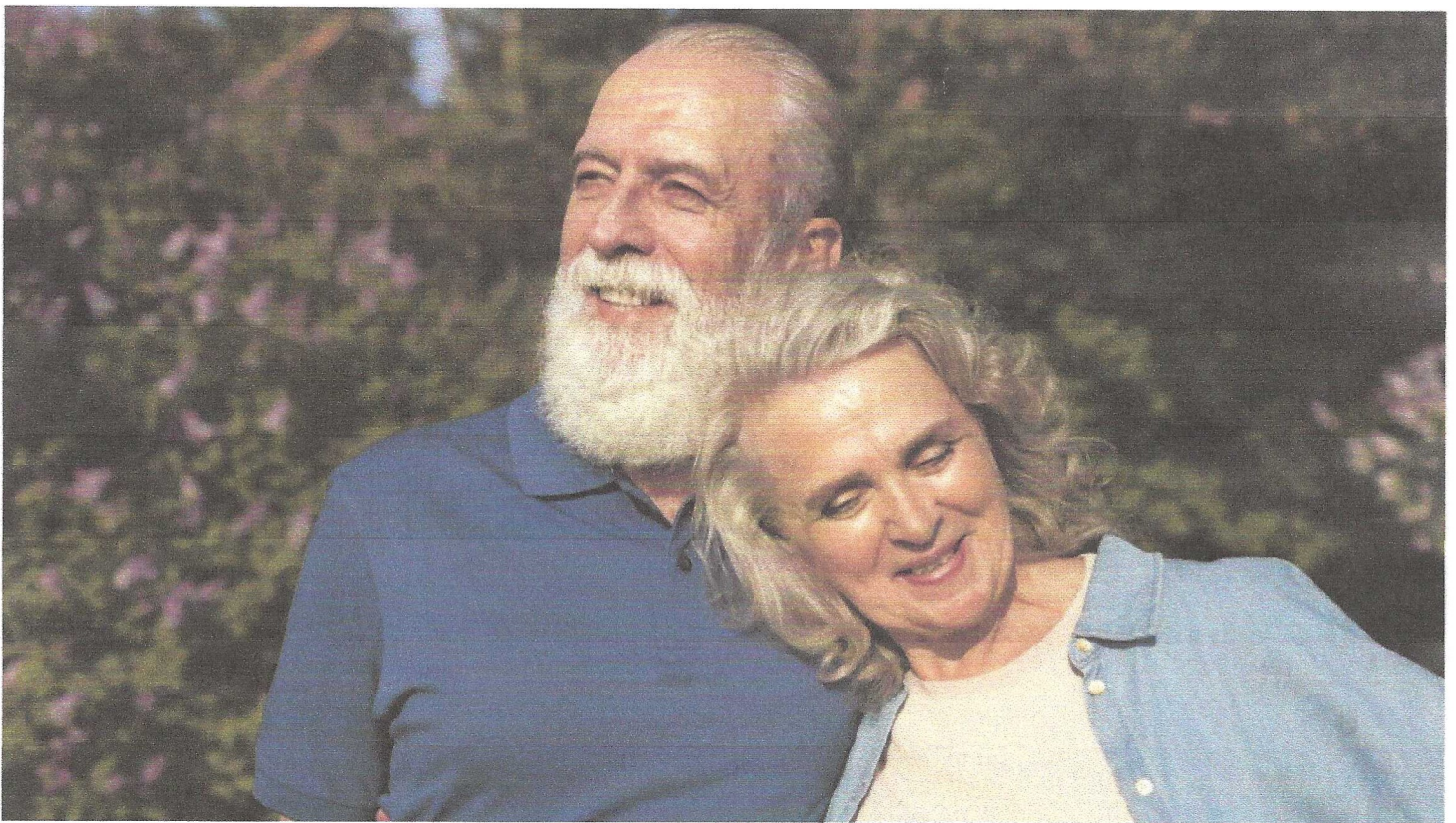


Peter Arnold: Aging Gratefully Means Balancing Risk and Reward

📅 December 20, 2024 👤 Peter Arnold





(Image by freepik.com)

Grappling with the aging process means adopting the right attitude, suggests one writer and senior citizen. By Peter Arnold

A good friend of mine — I'll call her Ellen — is a wonderful, thoughtful mother and wife in her 50s. But sometimes I catch her uttering things that, no doubt, would greatly upset my late father.

For example, Ellen has often told me about her two cousins, a brother and sister in their mid and late 40s. Ellen dearly loves both of her cousins, but they haven't actually spoken to each other in years.

Ellen usually gives me the back story and says sadly, "What are you going to do?" Then she sighs in disappointment, throws up her hands and changes the subject.

If I had ever talked about this situation with my dad — may his memory be a blessing — he'd likely look me straight in the eye and say, "Son, she's asking the *right* question but giving the *wrong* answer. She should listen to herself and understand that what she should be asking is, 'What am I going to do about it?' Throwing up her hands and changing the subject is no answer."

My dad taught me that almost all of the time, you can do *something* that deals with all or part of a problem, including those that are really difficult or painful. For instance, people who are aging and dealing with critical medical conditions might not be able to get cured, but they can change their attitudes toward their situation.

That's sometime hard to do if you're angry about your lack of good health and, on top of that, feeling depressed and experiencing pain. But instead of dwelling on the challenges, you can fight back. Do this by visiting, calling or emailing with people you love, remembering the details about past events that made you happy, reading the Bible and other books that are meaningful to you, walking and exercising, playing cards or video games, watching your favorite movies or streaming video series, and anything else that gives you pleasure.

Let me give what I think is a memorable example. I'm close to a 92-year-old man I'll call David who lives in a charming house with his wife of many years. He also has a host of medical problems. To deal with them, he sees at least two physicians and other health professionals every single week.

Unfortunately, every four or five months, one of his conditions worsens, so much that he needs an operation. You can't guess what he thinks about as the day of an operation approaches. But

David always says, "This is going to be a new adventure!"

Seriously. Time after time, that's what he tells me and everyone else.

"Come on," I shot back the first few times he said this to me. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I am not kidding. Not for a second," he'd respond, raising his voice for emphasis.

I would persist. "But how can you possibly be happy about going to a hospital,

having anesthesia and an operation, regaining consciousness with a body that's just been invaded, and then facing days or weeks of recovery? How can you be happy about any of this?"

David would respond, "Because all of it *is* an adventure. There's risk and reward, new people who'll care for me in the hospital, and people at home who love me and will be happy that I'm recovering. And there's something else — this operation might not have even been possible years ago. I'm fortunate to benefit from today's medical advances and the people specially trained in my particular operation to conduct my surgery."

David chooses to think positively about every operation. And I should note, he's been to a lot of hospitals over the past 91 years.

While David's attitude is rare, several people I know facing upcoming events and challenges often fear that the worst is most likely to happen. My mother — may her memory be a blessing — used to say to me, "Of course bad things can happen, but worrying about them now will only get you down and you'll be down again if it doesn't go well. If you don't fear it and it doesn't even happen, or it goes well, think how much better you'll feel."

I never liked arguing with my mother, but I often said, "Now Mom, that's easier said than done. Don't you want to prepare for something bad *before* it happens?"

She would smile and say, "Peter, if a hurricane was on the way, you'd be smart to fear and prepare for it. But most things aren't like that. It's not good for you to think that a new friendship won't last, the boss won't like your new idea, your team won't win, the operation won't be successful, you'll never find a house you'll like and can afford, or dinner will be a disaster. Do whatever you can to prepare for success, then relax and let it happen."

There's an additional way to enjoy life more as you age: Take a greater interest in other people. Is there someone you could have helped last week but didn't? If so, circle back this week and do something for or with them. Identify a person who needs to talk, listen to him or her and give them a sense of comfort.

Would someone close to you benefit from your knowledge and experience if you took an interest and talked sensitively with them, acknowledging their thoughts and feelings? Is there a group you can join where you can make a contribution and grow as a person?

In other words, can you reach out to one or more people in ways that make the world a better place?

Or as my good friend Ellen would ask, "What are *you* going to do?"

