



One secret to happy aging? Learn to stop fearing it

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Fighting the signs of aging is a costly effort. The market for anti-wrinkle creams and other products and procedures to help people look younger is estimated to grow to more than US\$106-billion by 2030, according to the research firm Vantage Market Research.

To Dr. Sally Chivers, though, wrinkles and grey hair are fascinating.

“There are zero health consequences associated with grey hair and wrinkles,” said Chivers, a full professor at the Trent Centre for Aging and Society at Trent University. Yet, she said, “they have become this sign of decay that’s happening inside that may or may not be a problem.”



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Chivers hosts a podcast, called *Wrinkle Radio*, that examines society’s assumptions about aging and encourages listeners to approach this universal process with a sense of acceptance and to see its potential upsides.

That means thinking of aging not “as just like walking off a cliff into this abyss of need and isolation and solitude, but instead, of time and of richness, of potential for community, of different rhythms, and of meaning,” she said.

Multiple studies show a positive attitude toward one’s own aging is associated with better physical health and well-being.

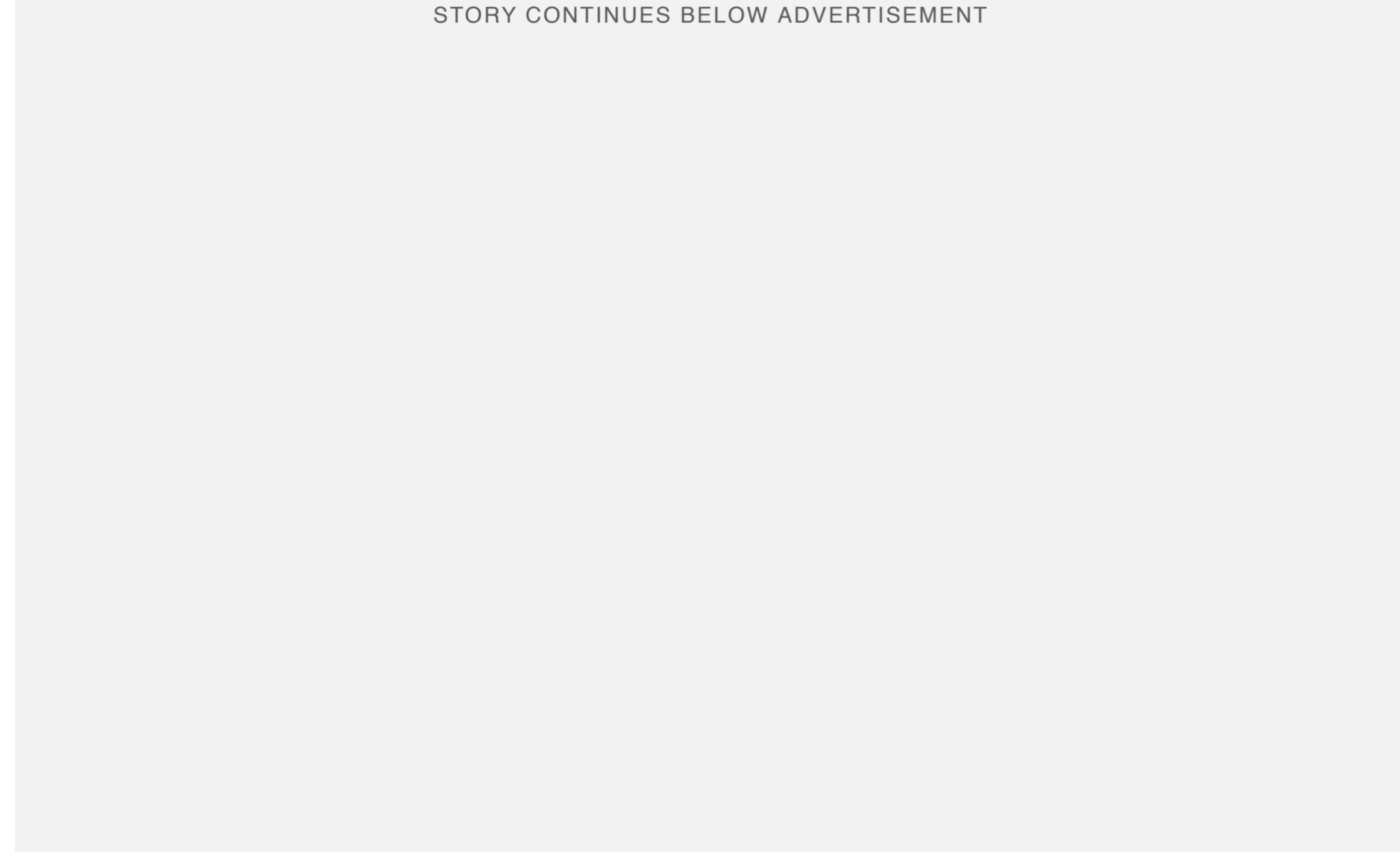
Dr. Eric Kim is the author of one such study, published in 2022 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*, which involved a large sample of retired U.S. adults. It found those who reported higher satisfaction about their own aging subsequently had better physical health, better health behaviours, such as more frequent physical activity, and better psychosocial well-being and were less lonely.

A concept called “stereotype embodiment theory” may explain why, said Kim, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. This theory suggests that when people internalize stereotypes about aging, it can hamper their health and well-being in a few different ways. One is psychological; if people believe poor health is inevitable with age, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This belief can prevent them from engaging in healthy behaviours because they may seem pointless, he said.

Another effect is physiological. Some studies, he said, have shown that when people’s internalized negative stereotypes of aging are activated, they go into threat-detection mode, and it heightens their cardiovascular stress response, including higher blood pressure and sweat.

And yet another effect is behavioural, where a negative mindset toward aging leads to poor sleep quality and decreased use of preventative health care services, Kim said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



On a daily basis, Sarah Robichaud sees, among her older adult students, the health and wellness benefits of having a positive outlook. Robichaud is the founder of the Ontario-based non-profit program *Dancing With Parkinson’s*, which offers in-person dance classes and free online classes to people with Parkinson’s, their care partners and the general population of older adults with varying abilities.

Through music and movement, her students experience a sense of acceptance and are able to express themselves and explore what they can do without any hang-ups, she said. The result, she said, is a lot of fun, laughter, connection with others, a sense of community and the benefits of physical movement.



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When people are able to set aside their negative expectations and perceptions about themselves, and just grant themselves permission to be who they want to be in the moment, Robichaud said, “then, we’re still living a vibrant life.”

So where do negative attitudes toward aging come from, in the first place?

Chivers said part of society’s fear of aging is tied to the fear of illness.

“We mistakenly associate aging only with illness, or disability, frailty or vulnerability,” she said. “We live in a time when that’s considered the wrong way to be in the world.”

Moreover, there is strong social messaging that the aging population will have enormous health care costs that will bankrupt society, she added. (These messages paper over some of the leading drivers of health care costs, such as pharmaceuticals, she said.)

And the fact that North American society is very segregated, where older and younger people rarely intermingle, contributes to people’s fears about what they haven’t experienced or encountered, Chivers said.

Adopting a positive attitude toward aging requires changing society’s views, said Dr. Dilip Jeste, a geriatric neuropsychiatrist based in San Diego, who specializes in successful aging.

He views ageism as similar to racism or sexism, as it limits people’s opportunities. For example, compulsory retirement in some places unfairly forces people to make less money and have less access to health care, he said, adding that everyone ages differently.

At a societal level, creating intergenerational spaces and activities are very important for allowing older and younger people to share their strengths, learn from each other and keep themselves active, Jeste said.

At an individual level, he emphasized the need for people to keep challenging themselves and seek out new experiences, as long as they’re not too stressful. Moreover, even though it can change over time, having a purpose in life, whether it’s teaching younger people, volunteering, or learning a new language, is critical for one’s health and well-being, he added.

The reality is aging doesn’t start only with the emergence of grey hair and wrinkles.

“Aging starts at conception,” Jeste said, explaining that even as children grow, they lose neurons and synapses as their brains develop. Likewise, he said, in some older people, there can be formation of new neurons and synapses.

In general, aging can also come with certain strengths, such as a greater capacity for compassion, empathy, self-reflection and more control over emotions, he added.

So sure, the multibillion-dollar industry of anti-aging products and treatments might make you look 20 again. But perhaps, given all the experiences and knowledge you’ve gained since then, you may see it’s a good thing that you’re not.

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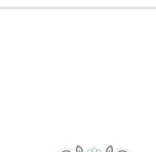
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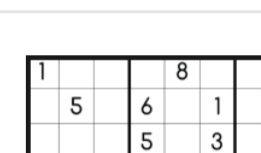
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