

TIRED OF PUSHING BIG GEARS? JUST GEAR DOWN AND ENJOY THE RIDE

by Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

A booklet on deepening our understanding of how chronic stress can produce feelings of helplessness and loss of control in life. By familiarizing ourselves with how sustained exposure to stress maintains helplessness, we can more effectively respond to the challenges and uncertainty of daily life. We must remember that stress only becomes unbearable when we feel incapable of modifying our lifestyles and maintaining control of our life. Altering our environment and making healthy lifestyle modifications will balance our lives, produce fulfillment and enable us to lead value driven lives from which to draw meaning and purpose. Integrating meaningful leisure activities, strategies to be resilient, initiating a fitness program and learning healthy nutrition habits will contribute to more lasting moments of happiness and contentment.

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The Levy Launch is a center providing organizations with management and strategy consultation to improve organizational performance through systematic analysis of existing organizational problems and developing specific plans for improvement. Our consultants will initiate and guide change processes, design systems and structures to support and manage change and implement technology. We offer corporate training, coaching and corporate education. The center's corporate development workshops include team building, leadership training and increasing managerial effectiveness. In addition, we offer self-improvement workshops. Organizations investing and making a commitment to offer their employee's personal development workshops attract more qualified workers, improve morale, enhance job satisfaction, develop competencies, and create inclusive work environments. In addition, corporations maximizing on opportunities to provide their employees with self-improvement workshops convey a sincere commitment to develop and empower their employees to achieve their fullest potential in relation to their personal and career pursuits.

Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.
-- Viktor Frankl

After all is said and done, more is said than done.
-- Italian proverb

We've figured it all out except how to live.
-- Sartre

Tired of Pushing Big Gears? Just Gear Down and Enjoy the Ride

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Let's See How Much I Know About What Stress Does to My Body and Some Other Important Things

What's your definition of stress?

Can a positive life event be stressful? If yes, please name some.

Can stress affect the functioning of your heart? How?

What are the stress chemicals released by the body during stress?

Can these stress chemicals, over time, accumulate in the body and damage your heart? How?

What is the number one killer of Americans today?

Did your socialization process in America teach you that to be successful in life you needed to have things?

How do you define success in life?

What do you do if there's a gap between what you actually have in life and what you want?

What is the difference between happiness and contentment?

Does having too much stress cause imbalance in your life? How so?

My meaning and purpose in life is

Do you create meaning and value in life-- or discover it?

What does purpose mean?

What is the difference between instrumental and sacred work?

Can you find meaningful work in large corporations? Describe how such a job can be meaningful and contribute to your happiness/contentment in life.

What does leisure mean?

Name a few leisure activities you enjoy. Are they oriented toward self-improvement?

What does this aphorism mean: "We have figured it all out except how to live"

From an existential perspective-- are our lives arbitrary and subjective? Are we sure why we're here and what we're supposed to be doing with our life.

To live a life free of deceit and self-justification for falling short, we must continually ask the right questions and challenge the paradigms that guide our thinking and how we do things. We need to shorten the gap between what we want and the way things are— re-evaluate our expectations and goals in terms of career and personal relationships. By doing so—you'll continue to clarify what is and isn't important to you. To begin this process of self-reflection and inquisitiveness, ask the right questions about your wonderful life.

The Modern Malaise

If we surveyed Americans, estimates would indicate that about 80% of us would admit we're under stress in our lives. The lifestyles we lead, including long commutes to work, dissatisfying jobs, anxiety and uncertainty about whether we'll be laid off, and concerns over our children's welfare can overload our system. At many turns, we're needing to manage a concern before it becomes a crisis. Consequently, some turn to over the counter drugs to cope and relieve anxiety and worries, and the tranquilizer Valium remains one of the most frequently prescribed medication. These are all ephemeral—quick, temporary fixes to serious complicated problems that will only re-emerge unless we make genuine, enduring lifestyle modifications.

In addition, estimates indicate that 13 million Americans are problem drinkers. The American Medical Association estimates that half of the revenue for medical services spent annually is due to unhealthy lifestyles. Let's call this condition the malaise of contemporary times. The furious pace we're maintaining just to keep pace with societal changes can lead to exhaustion. Invariably, we experience life as complicated, impersonal and ever-changing; not allowing us to appreciate our commitments to family and friends. The existential vacuum we feel trapped in produces feelings of alienation and despair in a seemingly impersonal world. The pervasive feeling of helplessness leaves us powerless and wishing to be rescued. Remember—despite all of us experiencing stress in our daily lives, stress only becomes unbearable and a tremendous burden if you feel you have lost control—that you cannot impact healthy, adaptive change to find meaning, fulfillment and purpose in life.

The confusion we experience may result from our conflicts around what we really want out of life. If what you're after is guided by society's prescribed values—the big house, a European luxury car and magnificent vacations every year; and you've had an epiphany; a breakthrough experience that's illuminated your misguided direction in life, then get back in the saddle with your compass and head in a different direction. You must realize that society often prescribes values and achievements for us—and that unless you stop, regroup and ask yourself if pursuing these societal values adds meaning and purpose in your life, you'll be achieving for others and not necessarily you. You need to achieve and live for you—not society or your employer.

Asking the Ultimate Question: What is my Purpose in Life?

What is the purpose of your life? You can begin by asking yourself what are the values that drive your life? By doing so—you'll see that values such as integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, responsible, spiritual and kindness will touch the lives of others in meaningful ways and, in part fulfill your pursuit of purpose in life. You then assert the purpose of your life is to be an outstanding performer at work by being honest, responsible and doing your job with integrity. Others around you will benefit from your honest work—they will feel more satisfied working with you.

In short—all of us want to lead value driven lives. However, some of us are so consumed with work, pacing furiously to get ahead, raising healthy kids and managing our schedules that we don't stop and ask those compelling questions. We spin and spin—not stopping to hydrate with a replenishing drink, and renewing our systems. Underneath, a lingering sense of futility and disillusionment pervades your outlook on life and it causes you to be confused about where you're going. You painfully realize there's a large gap between what you expect in life and what you actually have. A moment of such insight is invaluable, and it should compel you to ask the ultimate question: Is this all there is to my life? Ideally—you stop spinning, hydrate and before getting back in the saddle of your bicycle, you re-evaluate your expectations, short/ long term goals and purpose in life. The value in experiencing such an epiphany is that it promotes genuine, lasting lifestyle changes—the kind that generates more moments of happiness, contentment and meaning in life.

However, regardless of how much self-direction and self-determination you exercise in America, making it in this great country isn't easy. Many of us are uncertain about our jobs, the rising interest rate, terrorism, our children's performance, the cost of gas and crime. In short, uncertainty and chronic exposure to these sources of stress keeps us vigilant—and for some, produces feelings of helplessness. In its most extreme, one can experience degrees of loss of control in life accompanied by the more serious existential questions like:

1. What am I doing with my life?
2. Is this life I'm leading really fulfilling for me?
3. What is my darn purpose in life?
4. Am I out of control?
5. Who will I become if I keep heading this way?

What Stress Does to Our Bodies

Essentially, the body recognizes two types of stress: Alarm and Vigilance; and our heart is involved in both stress responses. In both conditions, the adrenal glands are involved; they are located above the kidneys.

Alarm

The first type is called Alarm where we experience an acute, wake-up reaction in response to fear or potential danger. We've labeled this reaction the fight or flight response—where our body prepares for a challenge and adrenaline races through our body, elevating our blood pressure and rushing blood to our muscle groups.

The adrenal medulla produces the hormone adrenaline that is responsible for the alarm reaction.

When we experience the alarm reaction—we perceive a stressor threatening our sense of control; and it usually results in us reacting aggressively or with anger

Vigilance

The second type is called Vigilance where we become accustomed to a chronic state of vigilance—our body prepares for long term, enduring stress; and we expect to survive it long term. The problem here is that chronic exposure to enduring stress results in our feeling we have no control over the stressor. In this state, cortisol circulates through our body, creating physical changes such as increasing gastric acid and lowering our immune system defending us against diseases.

The adrenal cortex produces the hormone cortisone that is responsible for the vigilance reaction.

When we experience the vigilance state, the stressor causes us to feel a loss of control—and it usually produces a passive response to the long term exposure of stress; we feel self-doubt, incapable and if the exposure to the stressful stimuli is indefinite, one can develop a depressive disorder. Depressed individuals usually have higher levels of cortisol in their bodies.

How Alarm and Vigilance Damage the Heart

1. In either condition, alarm or vigilance, the adrenaline and cortisol secreted into our arteries elevates blood pressure, and over an extended period of time, one can be at risk for developing high blood pressure.
2. Adrenaline is known to increase stickiness of platelets which tend to be blood clotting fragments
3. The presence of cortisol also increases the number of harmful platelets
4. Platelets tend to connect to the damaged artery walls—creating lumps of blood fats which may lead to a condition called atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).
5. Alarm and vigilance increase high blood pressure and damage arteries.

Stress Related Conditions

In America, one third of people with high blood pressure don't know they have the condition. Eventually, hypertension can leave one at risk for stroke, kidney failure and heart failure. Research indicates that hypertension doubles your risk for heart attack.

In addition:

1. If you have hypertension and you smoke—you are 8 times higher at risk for heart attack
2. If you have hypertension, smoke and high cholesterol—you are 12 times higher at risk for heart attack

Hypertension

Research indicates that high blood pressure damages the heart by:

1. Causing our heart muscle to increase in size—and the heart has to pump more vigorously—harder; over time it can lead to congestive heart failure.

Hypertension can damage and narrow the large arteries that supply blood to our body; thereby reducing the circulation of oxygenated blood and nutrients to our body's tissues.

Hypertension can also produce a condition called atherosclerosis—which is narrowing and hardening of the arteries because of an accumulation of fatty acids in the walls of our arteries. Essentially, atherosclerosis reduces the supply of blood to our heart which can result in angina (chest pain).

Stroke

One can have a stroke when high blood pressure narrows an artery in the brain enough to cause it to rupture; we call this a brain hemorrhage.

Kidneys

Our kidneys are at risk for damage when high blood pressure damages arterioles bringing blood to the kidneys; making it more difficult for the kidneys to rid the body of waste products; this condition results in kidney failure

In our cardiovascular system, stress damages the arteries connected to the heart, heart muscles and the heart's electrical system.

Exposure to Chronic Stress Can be Linked to the following:

Allergies, anxiety and depression, fatigue, digestive disorders, headaches, heart disease, high blood pressure, insomnia, irritable bladder, irritable bowel syndrome, mouth and peptic ulcers, muscular aches and pains, panic attacks

Early Warning Signs of Stress

Emotional Signs

- 1) apathy – feeling sad, no leisure activities are fulfilling
- 2) anxiety – feeling restless, insecure, worthless,
- 3) irritability – feeling defensive, hypersensitive, argumentative, arrogant
- 4) mental fatigue – feeling preoccupied, difficulty concentrating
- 5) overcompensation or denial – grandiosity, feeling too important, denying you have problems, ignoring symptoms

Behavioral Signs

- 1) avoiding things – keeping to yourself, avoiding work, not accepting responsibility
- 2) doing things to extreme – gambling, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, gambling
- 3) administrative problems – being late to work, poor personal hygiene, accident prone
- 4) legal problems – shoplifting, traffic tickets, going into debt
- 5) compulsive eating, withdrawal, impulsivity, carelessness, aggressiveness, increased alcohol use

Physical Signs

- 1) excessive worrying, denial of problems
- 2) frequent illness
- 3) physical exhaustion
- 4) self-medicating
- 5) having headaches, appetite changes, sexual problems, sleeping disturbance, general aches and pains, grinding teeth, indigestion, difficulty sleeping, weight gain or loss, upset stomach.

Cognitive Signs

1. preoccupation, blocking, blurred vision, diminished productivity, reduced creativity, lack of meaning in life, low self esteem

Work: In the Saddle and Pushing Big Gears

Do you live to work or work to live? Should our work be more to us than just a paycheck? And what's wrong if work is just a paycheck to us? Work is an indispensable activity for defining our sense of self. However, work alone does not pull for or engage our total self. It represents one dimension of our multiple identities from which we can draw self-esteem. Interestingly, work will influence how others think of you. It is more than just an instrument enabling us to live a utilitarian life. The view of work as instrumental is a traditional American view, a consumerist perspective of work which may or may not fulfill our yearning for meaning and purpose in life.

One could define work as an activity performed for economic security and sustenance. In this way, work is conceived as instrumental and a means to an end. In contrast, a whispered call also represents work—but it is an activity carrying deeper, inherent value for the individual and society? In this condition of employment, the individual sees clearly how performing their dignified work contributes to enhancing the lives of others or connecting to the larger community.

Americans want to work and we have a peculiar curiosity about what each of us does for work. We believe we should work, even if we don't need the money. Our belief that work, in part defines who we are has its origins in Protestantism, and is defined as the Protestant Ethic which asserts that work is virtuous, we have a duty to work and for some, it may represent a calling. The individual who works benefits by accomplishing goals and gaining self-worth.

Work Alienation

Work alienation is likely to occur when an employee experiences less control over the process and function of their job. Further, their job seems overly routinized and simplistic. One could describe their job as meaningless and feeling isolated. The inability of an employee to connect what he/she does to the successful performance of the organization can result in meaninglessness. Such an employee may also feel isolated and a lack of purpose in their work. Studs Terkel (1974, 557-558) describes the following blue collar worker's expression of his dissatisfying job:

After forty years of workin' at the steel mill, I am just a number. I think I've been a pretty good worker. That job was just right for me. I had a minimum amount of education and a job using a micrometer and just a steel tape and your eyes—that's a job that was just made for me... Bob (his son) worked in the mill a few months during a school vacation. He said, "I don't know how you done it all these years. I could never do it." I said, "I been tellin' you all your life never get into that mill."

Connectedness

For some, work needs to provide deeper meaning so that one understands how their job connects to the big picture; how what they do makes a difference in the lives of others. It can express our deepest yearnings for dignity, for we want to express our validation that the individual receiving your service is a valued human being deserving to be treated in a dignified way.

The Search for Meaningful, Sacred Work

Ideally--- what should drive work? Perhaps it needs to be charged by spirit; by something that ultimately deepens and enriches our lives; that allows us to connect the work we do to the larger picture.

Our needs for validation and feeling worthwhile can derive from the work we do when others acknowledge that our work (relationships with others) has made a difference in their lives. William James said “I will act as if what I do makes a difference.” Remember, you want to make meaningful contributions to the world—and by clarifying the values that drive your life, the more often you’ll see a connection to how your work contributes to the satisfaction and pleasure of others. I think sacred work is something you truly value—it’s work that pulls for the best in you; something that is intrinsically motivating for you and it’s work that is valued for itself. If one feels that his/her work truly pulls for their knowledge, talents and assets; and they are passionate about their work— then he/she can assert that it’s real, true work. Passion comes from deep inside of us—it’s charged by spirit and it intrinsically drives us to perform at our highest levels.

Since childhood, our socialization process taught us we needed to be something; to become something as life unfolded—to become a nurse, plumber, lawyer, teacher, bus driver, firefighter, pilot, mechanic. Also, do you think that we’re socialized to “have” rather than “be”? If being informs our actions, and defines our self-concept as a great mother, father, plumber, recruiter, lawyer, student—then we’re likely to become self-assured and feel the connection to what we’ve become and what we are with others; we are a great sibling, plumber, mother to my kids because I operate in my role as a mother exceptionally well—I draw self-esteem from my functioning as a mother in this role. On the flip side--- to “have” suggests we concern ourselves with materialistic consumption where we’re likely to define who we are by objects to accessorize our lives. Again—in moderation this isn’t so bad--- but if you’re primarily driven by attaining objects of status to show others your success then you’ll be working long hours for more money, spend time looking for others to compare yourself to and discover they’ve got more than you, and you’ll likely become what I call the “hungry and dying for attention” individual. Accumulating material status objects does not lead one to be passionate about their work. What’s the problem? In our culture money can be used symbolically to define success and for some, it is life-enhancing; in other words, it buys one life—because without money you experience social death (those in poverty).

In summary, we pursue utilitarian objectives (economic) through work and search for ways to express our deeper desires for connecting with the larger social and cultural community. One can assert that all human beings desire to discover how they belong to the larger community of humanity. Clarifying for oneself how he belongs—feels connected to community anchors will more clearly validate his contribution to improving conditions for living for all.

Think on This:

Do you agree that work and life should be driven by values dear to us? If so—which values?

Ideally—work should deepen and enrich our lives. How can one begin to determine if and how their work deepens their lives?

If your work calls you there—through a whisper in the night, a calling or through a dream; and you’re passionate about it because it pulls for your competencies, work values and preferences—then can you consider it sacred work?

Get Fit So You Can Push Any Gears

“After all is said and done, more is said than done”

--Italian proverb

It is irrefutable: certain healthy behaviors can contribute to longevity. In other words, exercising reduces your risk of dying. Period. *Sarcopenia* is what occurs to our bodies as the result of a phenomenon called aging. It's just a fancy word meaning that our muscles weaken and shrink as we age.

The research indicates that physical exercise is an effective method to relieve tension. A good workout enables our body to function more efficiently. The physiological benefits include improving your cardiovascular system, strengthening your heart, better elasticity of blood vessels, putting more oxygen in your body and finally, lowering your blood levels of fats like cholesterol and triglycerides. In sum, these benefits lower your risk of experiencing heart conditions, strokes and high blood pressure.

In terms of the psychological/mental benefits, exercising is an excellent way to release negative emotions like anger, irritability and frustration. Physiologically, it enhances our mood by releasing positive biochemicals in the brain. A regular exercise program reduces the amount of adrenal hormones in your body—a stress chemical. Further, greater levels of endorphins are released--- and this chemical is pain relieving, mood elevating. Increased endorphins in the brain account for the runner's high we hear about. The research also indicates that our problems seem less important and troubling when we exercise--- swim, run, walk or cycle. Remember—exercising uses up any of the excess stress chemical adrenaline which is beneficial to us. Like our bodies needing rest—we need to rest and relax our brain, and exercise is the best way to rest our mind.

Exercise and proper eating habits can actually form new bone tissue, improve cardiovascular endurance and add muscle strength. Eating lox and bagels does nothing for your bone tissue. In addition to these benefits, exercise strengthens the heart and lungs and lowers blood pressure. Individuals who regularly exercise are less likely to experience chronic fatigue. Feeling tired usually results from poor circulation which is related to an absence of physical activity. The muscles of inactive older adults usually shrink which reduces their strength. An exercise program which includes light weight lifting builds and maintains muscular strength and endurance. According to researchers at the Human Population Laboratory of the California Department of Health, the following list of behaviors are associated with health and longevity:

1. Regular exercise
2. Moderate use of (or abstinence from) alcohol
3. Regular meals
4. Weight control
5. Adequate sleep
6. A good breakfast
7. Abstinence from smoking

The researchers found that males could add 11 years to their life and females could add another seven years to their life by practicing six of the seven behaviors. As you can see, an active lifestyle adds years to life. So, how much time is required daily to achieve the benefits of exercise and fitness? The fitness experts agree that about 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity of physical activity three days a week is acceptable.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to lift heavy weights or run 12 miles a day. The goal of incorporating a fitness program into your wonderful life is to reduce your risk of coronary artery disease (CAD). CAD is America's number one killer and it includes heart disease and stroke, in addition to atherosclerosis. About one million people die from these diseases every year.

The best way to reduce your risk is by strengthening the working of your heart and improving the circulation of the blood in your body. First you need to understand that your heart doesn't have to work as hard at pumping blood through your body when you exercise regularly. The added oxygen in your blood that comes from regular physical activity enables your heart to meet its demands with less strain. This translates to your heart pumping more blood with each beat, which means it isn't beating as often.

What are the different forms of exercises to consider? First of all, consider what your skills and abilities are before selecting a form of exercise. The kinds of exercises include:

Strength Training (lifting weights):

The value in lifting weights is that it makes your bones stronger, improves balance and mobility and it increases muscle strength and mass.

Stretching (flexibility):

The benefits of stretching are that it improves your flexibility, reduces your risk of injury and muscle strain, and stretching increases blood flow and helps loosen muscles in your arms, shoulders, back, chest, buttocks and thighs. You can warm up and cool down with about 10 – 15 minutes of stretching exercises.

Aerobic (endurance exercises):

Aerobic sorts of exercises strengthen your heart and improve overall fitness by increasing your body's ability to use oxygen. Examples of aerobic exercises are swimming, running, walking, cycling and dancing—activities that are sustained and that involve the major muscle groups. Aerobic exercises increase your heart and respiratory rate.

Anaerobic Exercise:

Anaerobic exercises are sometimes referred to as low impact does not necessarily increase your respiratory or heart rate because you don't exercise vigorously. The goal of an anaerobic activity is to improve muscle strength and flexibility.

The benefits of a fitness program include the following:

1. Your blood gets enriched and improves your circulation
2. Exercising restores your elasticity and strengthens muscles
3. Imagine increasing your endurance
4. Your posture will improve
5. Exercising improves your cardiovascular system; strengthens heart and creating elasticity blood vessels.
6. Exercising increases oxygen throughout your body
7. Your blood levels of fats such as cholesterol and triglycerides are lowered by exercising
8. Exercising lowers your risk of developing heart conditions, stroke and high blood pressure.
9. Exercising will boost your morale and confidence, making you feel and look younger
10. Your agility and mobility improves by exercising

The psychological benefits to exercising include the following:

1. It is an outlet for negative emotions such as frustration, anger, and irritability
2. Exercising puts you in a more positive mood by producing biochemical changes in the brain. A consistent exercise program reduces the amount of adrenal hormones in your body—a stress chemical secreted when we're under stress.
3. A positive outcome of exercising includes your body releasing greater amounts of endorphins—a pain relieving, mood elevating chemical in the brain.
4. Exercising promotes deep, restful sleep.
5. Most individuals do not worry when exercising—giving them an opportunity to focus on other things while exercising. In other words, these individuals are resting their minds.

A study on walking reported in the New England Journal of Medicine showed that routine brisk walking helped prevent heart disease in women. This study included about 72,000 women between the ages of 40 and 65, and it spanned eight years. The researchers found that walking reduced the risk of heart attacks in women. What was really astonishing was that walking reduced the risk of heart attacks just as much as other more vigorous and intense exercises. So, what does this mean for you? It means you don't have to run a marathon to reduce your risk of heart disease.

The study also found that women who walk briskly for about three hours a week lower their heart attack risk by 30 to 40%. Again, what's so striking about this finding is that this 30% to 40% is the same reduction in risk for women who run, swim or do aerobics. So what does all this mean? It means that you don't have to run, swim or do aerobics to reduce your risk of heart attack. The thing is though, when you walk you really need to walk briskly. The goal should be to walk one mile in twenty minutes. If you decide to get addicted to walking, then start walking five or more hours every week. If you do, you'll reduce your risk of heart attack in half. I want you to know that there are other great benefits to walking. Walkers lower their blood pressure and cholesterol, burn calories and improve their bone strength.

Tips To Keep You Motivated To Exercise

I know. It's awful difficult to stay motivated to work out. So, here are some tips to consider when you're about to start an exercise program:

1. Select activities you'll truly enjoy.
2. Incorporate the exercise into your daily routine.
3. Attempt to exercise with a partner or group of people. The social interaction helps a lot.
4. Maintain a log of your program and progress.
5. If possible, exercise to music.
6. Wear proper fitting shoes and comfortable clothes while exercising.

Pushing Any Gears is Easier if You Eat Right

I'll start this section by summarizing what most nutritionists will recommend for healthy eating: maintaining balance, moderation and having a variety of foods. I am not a nutritionist and this material constitutes general guidelines for maintaining a healthy body and weight.

Remember that obesity is usually associated with high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

The sensible approach to losing weight takes time—and for starters you need to increase your physical activity. If you eat enough of the right foods and exercise, you'll activate the body's fat burning mechanism which will maintain your body weight. A well balanced diet will preserve good health and help you cope with stress.

Recommendations:

1. Eat less fatty foods, less sugar and sweets
2. Eat more fruits, vegetables, grains and cereals.
3. Do your best to avoid alcohol which contains lots of calories

Variety

The thinking is that the greater the variety of foods you consume, the less likely you will develop a deficiency of nutrients. So—to incorporate a nice variety of foods into your diet, become accustomed to selecting foods from the basic four food groups:

- a. Meat Group: lean meat, skinned poultry, fish, eggs, dry beans, peas, and nuts
(2 or more servings each day)
- b. Milk Group: lowfat or skim milk, lowfat cheese, lowfat yogurt
(2 to 4 servings per day)
- c. Vegetable and Fruit Group: citrus fruit and one green or yellow vegetable
(4 or more servings per day)
- d. Bread and Cereal Group: whole grains
(4 or more servings per day)

The Importance of Eating Breakfast

The literature indicates that industrial accidents occur to employees who don't eat breakfast. Invariably, skipping breakfast results in poor coordination and low blood sugar. If you skip breakfast, you may go for 16-18 hours before eating. The problem is your body expects the metabolic stimulation provided by a healthy breakfast. A diet coke, donut and a cigarette doesn't constitute breakfast.

Fat and Saturated Fat

Saturated fats come primarily from animal fats and dairy products.

Unsaturated fats constitute vegetable fats—safflower, sunflower, corn and soybean oil are all polyunsaturated fats.

Nutritionists recommend that we consume 30% or less of calories from fat

Cholesterol

Cholesterol is carried in the blood by lipoproteins, which is a combination of fat and protein. Research shows that high levels of blood cholesterol increase the chances of heart attack and stroke. Our blood cholesterol level should be under 200mg/dl

To decrease cholesterol, consider the following suggestions:

1. Lose weight if you are overweight
2. Initiate a regular exercise program which will elevate your good cholesterol (HDL)
3. Decrease your intake of saturated or animal fat
4. Increase your intake of unsaturated fats
5. Attempt to decrease your use of alcohol
6. If you smoke, quit smoking
7. Eat less meat, especially red meat and eat more skinned chicken and fish.
8. Eat lean cuts of meat
9. Eat less high fat meat like bacon, pork, sausage and lunch meats.
10. Limit how much butter you eat, shortening, lard, and chocolate.
11. If eating meat—don't fry-- bake, roast, and boil meat.

Including Starch and Fiber in Your Diet

Carbohydrates are one of the major sources of energy for the body. Although protein provides energy—it's not as much as carbohydrates. There are two kinds of carbohydrates: Complex and Simple:

1. Complex Carbohydrates: these are more nutritious than simple carbohydrates like sugar; and they include starches, vegetables, dried beans and peas, nuts, breads, and cereals. These food items contain many essential nutrients for the body. The more you eat foods high in fiber, the more likely you will not experience chronic constipation and diverticulosis.
2. Simple Carbohydrates: these sources of energy are less nutritious and carry more calories than the complex carbohydrates.

Include Carbohydrates in Your Dietary Habits

Carbohydrates remain a major source of energy—and they release serotonin which is a neurotransmitter in the brain that functions to soothe us. As mentioned earlier, sources of carbohydrates are rice, potatoes, breads and vegetables. Research shows that some of these foods, such as a potato, spaghetti or rice contains enough carbohydrates to relieve stress.

Reduce Your Intake of Sugar

All of us know that to avoid tooth decay, reduce your intake of sugar. For our purposes, excess sugar intake is associated with high blood fats like cholesterol and triglycerides. Further, excess sugar raises your level of blood sugar. Excess amounts of sugar in your body causes the pancreas to secrete insulin which acts to reduce the high blood sugar. Over time, if your body produces too much insulin, it lowers our blood sugar level and you're at risk for developing reactive hypoglycemia.

The following are recommendations to avoid excess sugar:

1. Try using less sugar products such as white sugar, brown sugar, raw sugar, honey and syrup.
2. Consume less candy, soft drinks, ice cream, cake and cookies.

3. Learn to read food labels to identify the sugar content; avoid sucrose, glucose, dextrose, lactose, and fructose

Limiting Your Intake of Salt and Sodium

Sodium is known to be associated to high blood pressure and is a salt containing sodium and chloride. Researchers assert that we eat too much salt in our diets—and that sodium is hidden in food products in the form of a preservative or chemical to flavor food. The following includes recommendations to reduce your intake of salt:

1. Don't use salt or very little of it when cooking.
2. Only use a little salt to flavor meals.
3. Reduce your intake of foods containing salt—such as prepared soups, potato chips, pretzels, salted nuts, popcorn, cheese, pickled foods, steak sauce and garlic salt.
4. Try using salt substitutes.

Things to Consider Changing:

Alcohol - In moderation, alcohol can benefit cardiovascular functioning. However, in our culture, alcohol can cause stress and is used to cope with stress. Alcohol causes the release of the stress chemical adrenaline and may produce tension, irritability and insomnia. It increases fat deposits in the heart and compromises our immune function. Finally, one function of the liver is to remove toxins in our body—and during stress our bodies produce many toxins (hormones). After consuming alcohol, the liver's ability to filter and remove these toxins is limited. As a result, these toxins circulate throughout the body and damage organs.

Caffeine - it is in coffee, tea, chocolate and other products like Coke and various soft drinks. After consuming caffeine, the body secretes adrenaline which increases stress levels. In moderate amounts, caffeine increases our alertness and activity. However, consuming large amounts of caffeine equates to exposure to long term/chronic stress. If you believe you are consuming too much caffeine, reduce your consumption gradually—otherwise you'll experience withdrawal symptoms.

What You're Doing With Your Time When You're Not Riding

Is it just me—or do you agree that most Americans have a difficult time gearing down, getting off the bike and relaxing? Unless you get off the bike and allow yourself to recover, you won't be recharged to get back on the bike Monday morning.

So—you're off work and want to play. You realize that free time is play time—and that play balances out life. I suspect you know how to work—but not how to play because you're not accustomed to enjoying the freedom of leisure. At work, you know what it expected of you, and measures are available to determine if you've achieved performance levels. Work processes are structured, planned and support is available if problems arise. However—leisure isn't defined for us as concretely and our challenge is to find activities that are inherently satisfying with intrinsic meaning. Leisure is an activity you very much enjoy doing on your own terms; either alone or with someone, indoors or outdoors and most importantly, at the time you desire.

Leisure is freely chosen and can be spontaneous; with the emphasis on an affective experience—at the level of emotion. Ideally—you are emotionally engaged and the activity gives you intrinsic value. The critical element here is that the leisure activity is freely chosen by you--- not anyone else.

Play is leisure time—an opportunity to engage in an activity that brings you immediate, intrinsic pleasure. It is self-determined and in Latin it means “to be permitted.” If you're not interested in doing a leisure activity, that's also acceptable. Research indicates that how some of us spend our leisure time is related to our socioeconomic status, educational level and culture.

In affluent societies like America, some of us prefer to spend our leisure time spending money rather than engaging in other activities. The choice to spend money shopping is a remnant of our traditional, consumerist lifestyles. However, the time spent shopping finds us in a mall and not on the beach reading a book or enjoying a sunset.

Think on this:

1. Leisure can give add meaning and purpose to life when it carries intrinsic value.
2. Leisure helps us develop new skills that may generalize to other areas of our life.
3. Leisure enables us to discover more about ourselves—to grow and mature.
4. Leisure—when selected by you, on your terms—provides you with freedom and choice.
5. Leisure engenders discovery of our hidden capabilities—and who we can become.
6. Leisure empowers you to reevaluate and clarify what truly is important to you in terms of how you spend your free time.

What are your leisure activities: _____

Classification of Leisure Activities:

List some activities under each category:

1. Companionship: _____

2. Temporary Disengagement: _____

3. Comfortable Solitude: _____

4. Expressive Solitude: _____

5. Expressive Service: _____

For some of us, how we spend our leisure time may be related to our work. Ideally, leisure activities should not be extensions of our work, but clearly different than what we do for a living. Offer examples of leisure activities that are considered an extension/related to work:

Leisure activities that are clearly different than work are what we should desire. Offer examples of these activities:

Finally—are leisure activities exclusively geared at self-improvement? Offer examples of leisure activities oriented toward self-improvement and activities that do not promote self-improvement:

The Pursuit of Happiness, Contentment and Meaning in Life Without Pushing Big Gears

A discussion about happiness needs to begin with how we define it in our culture. The literature shows that happiness tends to be culturally defined—and some experience happiness as momentary and fleeting. So—it would be difficult to sustain happiness over a long period of time. I suspect that sustaining contentment is the preferred condition. Contentment interspersed with fleeting moments of happiness is the ideal. Further—a discussion of happiness and contentment in life includes understanding how it is related to one's philosophy of life.

Happiness and Contentment in Life is Related to Your Philosophy of Life

Although this can be a difficult question—you must ask yourself what is your philosophy of life? A philosophy of life— one that explains good and evil, why millions perish in the Holocaust, why genocide occurs and why there are miracles and good, virtuous people is indispensable to cultivating a happy or unhappy life. If we reacted emotionally to all the horror and anguish people suffer in the world—we would be melancholic and unhappy for an indefinite period of time. Tragically—there is enough suffering in the world to keep one unhappy and the injustice committed daily at the hands of brutal regimes and dictators.

In relation to our own lives, we cannot let each day's disappointments discourage us, and by reacting emotionally it would be difficult to recover without feeling anxious and fearful to wake up the next day. Adopting a sustaining and stable philosophy of life inoculates us from bleeding every day in our lives—and enables us to frame disappointments in perspective—to perceive these troubling events in light of the big picture.

You can frame your outlook on life to religion/faith if you like, or you can have a philosophy of life rooted in a secular view. The reason it is critical to articulate your philosophy of life is because it will influence how you interpret good and bad events in your life. Your emotional reactions to desirable and undesirable events in life are determined by what you attribute them to. So—in the end, it's you that determines how much distress or unhappiness an event will have on you. A philosophy of life needs to sustain you—for the long ride in the saddle and not one you conveniently or arbitrarily create to overcome a single, distressing event. It needs to be deeply meaningful for you and enduring—one that you consistently use to understand why events occur in your life and the world. You can define this philosophy of life as an enduring theory that explains life's events. If you cannot explain your philosophy of life, you will more likely find it difficult to make sense of this absurd, seemingly meaningless world you live in. You will also be susceptible to interpreting events in a negative way that may leave you unhappy living in this uncertain, arbitrary, subjective world.

What is Your Philosophy of Life?

It was Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi death camps who emphasized the role of meaning and purpose in life to sustain the will to live. Frankl endured the agony of being a death camp prisoner and from his work, we draw how critical meaning and purpose is for contentment in life. So—where do we draw meaning and

purpose in life from? As human beings living in a democracy, we enjoy institutions and systems of meaning available to us—from work, family, relationships and religion.

Attaining Meaning and Purpose in Our Life Spheres and its Relationship to Contentment

If you can assert your work is meaningful for you, then you are fortunate to be in an environment that is fitting for you. You are in a position that pulls for your capabilities, talents and your work values are nicely aligned with the organization that employs you. The compensation may or may not be enough for you—but since you have meaningful work, it isn't the most important element for you. You are content with your occupation—whether it carries occupational prestige or not. Obviously, we are all drawn to certain occupations for different reasons. Some of us search for work with high income and prestige—and some look for work that pays less and without prestige—but work that holds opportunity for personal meaning. Where are you?

In terms of our personal relationships, meaning is derived when we feel valued, worthwhile and fulfilled in roles we assume. As a parent, little is more precious than seeing your child's innocent smile after learning how to ride his/her bicycle alone for the first time. Human beings need self-esteem maintenance—derived from knowing they are loved, valued and indispensable to others. We need to know we belong to our families, organizations we work for and to the world. In the big picture—we need to know we're more than just organisms occupying space in the world. Rather—we are organisms with substance and we belong to this world in a significant way.

A Noble, Worthwhile Endeavor: Volunteering

A way to acquire meaning and purpose in life is to dedicate time to a noble, worthwhile cause dear to your heart. To manage the pervasive existential angst in all of us—we need to dedicate ourselves to a cause that transcends our immediate small place in the world. One can draw meaning and purpose by dedicating time to support an agency that helps abolish world hunger or volunteering at a food bank to feed the disenfranchised. The opportunities to engender meaning and purpose in life through dedication to a cause that makes a difference in people lives are endless.

I Want You to Make Me Happy

For some individuals, happiness is something to be gained from others. In other words, individuals want to be made happy—expecting others to purchase materials for them or to provide them with opportunities to experience happiness. These individuals undoubtedly have been conditioned to expect happiness to be derived from external agents. I think happiness or contentment needs to be internally derived—meaning it comes from inside of you and not an external agent acting on you to create happiness.

How We Conceptualize Money: Is it a Death Denying, Immortality Symbol

The cultural anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Becker wrote about money and how human beings treat it in modern society. Becker summarizes Norman Brown's historical definition of money as representing a sacred, magical object human beings relish as their gateway to immortality. Becker basically believes that human beings assign great value to things that give life, that enable them to overcome what ordinary people cannot overcome. For Becker, money is sacred because it grants some power over others. Think about it: an enormous amount of money gives people freedom from responsibilities of caring for their home, parents, children, car and other responsibilities. More importantly, and, in a powerful and visible way, money separates the ordinary, routine life of Hank from the perversely wealthy Lance. Money makes Lance look quite different from Hank. Money enables Lance to distance his likeness to Hank.

Becker, asserts that money gives human beings a limitless ability to indulge in their every passion, especially material items. The connections both of these theorists make is the one between money, sacredness and power. So, for Becker, power is the medium man uses to deny his mortality. A great amount of money can keep me alive longer than it can you if you've got less of it. Becker puts it like this:

"Power means power to increase oneself, to change one's natural situation from one of smallness, helplessness, finitude, to one of bigness, control, durability, importance. In its power to manipulate physical and social reality money in some ways secures one against contingency and accident; it buys bodyguards, bulletproof glass, and better medical care. Most of all, it can be accumulated and passed on, and so radiates its powers even after one's death, giving one a semblance of immortality as he lives in the vicarious enjoyment of his heirs that his money continues to buy, or in the magnificence of the art works that he commissioned, or in the statues of himself and the majesty of his own mausoleum. In short, money is the human mode par excellence of coolly denying animal boundness, the determinism of nature."

In talking about the items money can furnish for us, Becker writes that the house, car, and bank account represent one's immortality symbols. I agree with Becker that immortality symbols, the visible, physical items, and their worth, are the only things one has to grant him/her eternal life. In the following passage Becker notes under what conditions one feels his or her immortality or significance in the world is threatened:

"Or, put another way, if a Black man moves next door, it is not merely that your house diminishes in real estate value, but that you diminish in fullness on the level of visible immortality—and so you die."

Sadly enough, in sum, Becker concluded that human beings transformed from a social animal that gave and passed on to one that was principally interested in amassing and keeping things. The historical taking of objects and falsely believing that this motive represents self-determination and self-direction in life, and by calculating interest on money earned in the bank, one bought into the illusion that one was in total and absolute control of one's destiny.

Money and Happiness

For some, happiness is associated with material, professional and financial success. Happiness may be equated with success—and although there's nothing wrong with this, it can become harmful if you exclusively define or equate your level of happiness to your professional or financial success. If we define happiness as generally fleeting—then you're under pressure to constantly chase opportunities that provide fleeting moments of happiness which can be difficult.

Two Types of Consumption: "Show You" type and the "Not Show You" type.

The "Show You" Type

For some individuals, consuming materials/objects and revealing them to others displays their success in life. Often times, these individuals are interested in the statement made by owning the object more than the utility of the object. For example if everyone in your department wears a modest watch, and one employee begins wearing a Rolex to work, then that employee would stand out among everyone until other employees purchased a Rolex. Invariably another employee purchases and wears a Rolex to work. The following month, another employee purchases a more expensive watch than a Rolex, and wears it to work. In the end, this endless chase for status through objects only devalues what others have. Further—money used to purchase expensive objects tends to also distance people from each other.

Not all Americans, however are driven to achieve material wealth; meaning it's not the primary driving force in their lives. Materialism simply means assigning high value to material possessions because it shows one's social status and success. Most of the time hard, disciplined work is the price we pay for material success. In America there is a tendency to think that differences in material possession reflects a difference in abilities. In other words, just because I'm not interested in attaining material possessions doesn't mean I don't have the ability to do so. I may be very successful and possess lots of ability however I'm not interested in showing my

success through owning luxurious cars or living in a multi-million dollar home. I think some human beings have an insatiable desire for things, and regardless of how much human beings possess, some want more. My explanation for this behavior is that these valued objects have enduring status value. Individuals who obtain status symbols like to keep them, and desire to continue inheriting big, fancy expensive items that display their social status. Thus, our system of stratification evaluates people on factors such as wealth, power and prestige. I've included a brief description of each of these factors.

The “Not Show You” Type

Individuals that purchase materials for their value and utility tend to do so more privately—and not for revealing their status and success in life. Purchasing a moderately priced toaster is nothing we'd brag about to friends.

What Creates More Happiness: A Material Object or an Experience?

If our happiness is often too fleeting or momentary—and we typically derive pleasure from the journey toward goal achievement—then doesn't that suggest we should pursue experiences that create happiness and contentment? I think happiness and contentment comes from the journey more than the destination (goal). So—can we conclude that for some individuals, happiness and contentment results from a worthwhile experience rather than purchasing an expensive object.

The Ultimate Question:

Would you rather do or have? Or maybe a little of both?

Remember—activities connect us to others and objects often separate us from others.

Is there a difference between happiness and contentment? If so—what?

Is a meaningful life a happy life?

Is happiness related to morality?

Is contentment related to morality?

Do you experience pleasure in the process of pursuing a goal?

Do you experience contentment after achieving the goal?

What feels better: the journey toward achieving the goal or the attainment of the goal?

Does it depend on the goal?

Do you believe you could learn more about yourself during the process of goal achievement? What might you discover about yourself during the journey toward a goal?

Shakespeare said: Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing. What does this mean?

Some authors studying happiness have defined the concept of a happiness set point—meaning we adapt to conditions of happiness. The adaptation principle means that we grow accustomed to a certain level of happiness. Do you agree?

Resilience: How to Get Back Into the Saddle After Taking a Fall

A man can be destroyed but not defeated.

-- Ernest Hemingway

Enjoy what you can; endure what you must.

-- Goethe

Anything that has real and lasting value is always a gift from within.

-- Franz Kafka

All of us need to learn how to more effectively recover from difficult and distressing events in our lives. In other words—how to get back into the saddle after falling off your bike. Yes—you may get scraped and suffer road rash. But these are temporary conditions that set you back a little. Invariably these events painfully remind us of how uncertain life is just as we're attempting to empower ourselves and insulate ourselves; to lead self-directed and meaningful lives. The research on resiliency and its relationship to longevity indicates that older adults who are resilient age at a slower pace, live longer and they are physically healthier.

Resilience is a strategy characterized by effective adaptation to adverse or distressing events. It's getting off the canvas at eight before they count you out at ten, and winning the fight by a split decision. It means trusting yourself, knowing that you can reach into your reservoir for the strength to overcome by using your abilities to adapt over time to stressful situations. To do so you have to develop personal strategies that enable you to recover and get on with life. Research on resiliency indicates that resilient individuals share the following characteristics:

- 1) Resilient individuals have a positive image of themselves, are self-assured and are confident they possess the abilities to overcome difficult situations, are self-disciplined, optimistic, insightful, believe in a better future and they are spiritually connected.
- 2) These individual are good problem solvers, have good communication skills, are reflective thinkers, resourceful, they know how to take initiative, are self-motivated, acquire strength from being challenged and adversity, and are able to plan ahead.
- 3) Resilient individuals are able to manage and self-regulate strong and powerful emotions.

So, how do we develop resiliency? I suppose we begin by accepting that change is an inherent and necessary aspect of life. External stressful events compel us to change and we can't just retreat to our safe, warm and comfortable bedroom and withdraw from everyone. Ducking your head under the covers won't work either because I'll pull the covers off. I suggest you invest energy focusing on what you can change.

Another potential self-destructive maneuver is interpreting a crisis in your life as insurmountable. As you know, you can't entirely avoid distressing events from occurring in your life, but you can modify how you interpret and manage stress. Framing the stressful event in a rational, accurate way, in terms how it will impact you, without over-reacting will enable you to calmly and effectively develop a plan to lessen its impact on your life. In other words, try to keep the stressful event in perspective and not obsess on how it will destroy your life. Be rational here and look at the stressor in the broader context of your life.

Remember, you're not alone and you have friends. I do hope you've got more than one or two friends. If you need a third friend, call me at the institute and I'll be your friend if you take me to dinner twice a month. I mean it now, I'll be a trusted, loyal, supportive and available friend. The only reason I'm mentioning the importance of relationships is because it strengthens resilience. You need to know that there are family members, friends and me available to help you in a pinch. The critical element here is knowing that you can rely on your circle of support to assist you when necessary, and knowing this instills hope and faith that you can overcome stressors.

The last thing I'll say about resilience is that you can discover underlying abilities in yourself by experiencing life difficulties. Many individuals assert they grew emotionally and learned more about their skills and competencies following a stressful event. For some individuals, they grew closer to others and created more meaningful and lasting relationships as a result of overcoming a difficult situation.

Out of the Saddle and Needing a Relaxation Technique After Pushing Big Gears

All of us need to learn to relax more and reap the benefits of disengaging from stressful environments. The objective of relaxation techniques is to reduce our negative responses to stress and improve our quality of life. Incorporating relaxation techniques consistently can provide the following benefits:

1. decreases your heart rate
2. lowers your blood pressure
3. increases circulation of blood to major muscle groups
4. reduces tension in muscles
5. reduces incidence of headaches and back pain
6. increases energy
7. reduces frustration, irritability and anger.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR involves tensing and relaxing the different muscle groups of your body. By focusing on each muscle group in your body, you learn where your muscle groups are located and sensing what it's like when your muscles are tense and relaxed. You can purchase scripts/tapes to guide you through the technique. Typically, you begin the tensing and relaxation of muscles beginning with the head and working to your toes. You can tense muscles for five seconds and relax for 30 seconds.

Visualization/Guided Imagery

In this technique, you focus on pleasant, relaxing scenes that represent peaceful settings. The scene you imagine is specific to you—and can include scenes from nature such as waves calmly rolling in from the ocean, the smell of the salt water to the feel of grains of sand. You may be in a meadow among horses or deer; or see running water and birds; feel the warmth of the sun. In short, you take yourself on a journey to a calm place. The objective of this technique is to insert yourself into the visualized scene for approximately 20 minutes and feel refreshed after the experience. Remember—use as many of your senses as possible; smell, sight, sound, etc. Finally—you can imagine stress flowing out of your body—packaging it in a box and discarding it.

To begin, lie on your back and close your eyes. Imagine yourself in this peaceful setting—seeing you there and sensing our surroundings. Listen for the peaceful sounds and smell the refreshing flowers or water. Enjoy the present sensations available to you in the scene and relax more deeply. After you become conditioned to this exercise and can determine when the 20 minutes is expired, and slowly emerge from your relaxation.

Other forms of relaxation include: yoga, tai chi, meditation, massage, music, hypnosis

Tips For Insuring You'll Finish That Century Ride (100 mile bike ride)

Do you want to increase your longevity? It sounds good--- only if you believe that increasing longevity means an engaged and meaningful life. It requires that you take responsibility for being the architect of your life; that you modify and recreate yourself enough to finish that century ride down the highway, with it's challenging hills, bumps and of course, the easy flat sections.

1. Adopt a Positive Attitude

Healthy aging means adopting a positive attitude about life, strengthening your ability to cope effectively, engaging in health promoting behaviors and avoiding infectious diseases. Remember, a sound mind informs a sound body; meaning that a healthy mind helps your body resist illness. In contrast, a healthy, resilient, strong body promotes positive thoughts and feelings about the self.

2. Don't Blame Your Bad Genes

It's easy to blame your genes for any health problems in your life. However, proper nutrition, exercise, an engaging life marked by healthy social support and interpersonal relations can offset and minimize the effects of bad genes on the quality of your life.

3. Maintain Your Level of Physical Fitness

If you exercise regularly—you'll maintain a level of fitness to increase muscle strength, agility, and endurance. Maintaining a fitness program will keep you healthy for the long ride.

4. Establish Mental Attitudes that Promote Healthy Aging

Remember—you need to be optimistic, continue nourishing a healthy self-esteem and be willing to adapt to new life circumstances as you age. You must be resilient and trust in your ability to be self-directed toward achieving increased meaning and purpose in life.

5. Live to Look at What's Possible

The self-directed, self-renewing older adult lives by searching for the multitude of ways to impact their immediate circle and their community. The older adult takes well measured risks to discover their potential.

6. Adopt the Lifelong Learner Attitude

Older adults adopting the attitude that they're lifelong learners retain mental acuity and stay excited about the mysteries of life. An inquiring mind keeps you passionate—especially about subjects that promote a sense of purpose in your life.

Reconceptualizing Aging as Passage of Time

What is aging? Aging is not an incurable disease. Mental illness – such as schizophrenia is and we need to understand that aging is a biological process, characterized by biological maturity. It is universal, inescapable and an eventuality-- in case you weren't aware of it or conveniently needing to deny it. Now, because it is a universal phenomenon doesn't mean all human beings age in a uniform way because culture influences the aging process. The simplest way to define aging is to say it is the passage of time. Once you do this, it's easier to understand how changing the way you use time can influence one's aging process. Similarly, variations in culture-- specifically how cultural institutions serve their members can influence how one ages. The institutions operating in a society—the sociocultural context in which the individual is embedded in can alter how one ages by how accessible resources are to members. So, aging viewed as a passage of time is inexorably connected to the sociocultural context because it alters lives. In our culture, the social attitudes of aging are that it is dreadful and the old are afflicted with degenerative, age related diseases. Aging is thus viewed as a problem to be solved—and through plastic surgery one can begin to undo the visible signs of aging to regain the glamour of youth. The mature response to aging ought not be to fear and defy death, but to conceptualize it correctly.

Thinking on Models of Life When You're Out of the Saddle

The Linear Model

Obviously linear implies a straight line and in our culture, we have a tendency to place numbers on lines to measure behavior or identify developmental milestones to be achieved. In relation to aging, the linear model suggests that adult lives move through predictable stages such as learning, loving, working, and living. Movement in this sequence also implies biological maturation. Linear thinking is results oriented—life is perceived as moving to higher levels of success, incremental improvements in social status, power and economic property. Finally—linear thinking implies we attempt to predict and control our lives. In terms of our culture, the linear model can be used to illustrate improving social conditions, technological progress and the benefits of industrialization. Again—there's nothing wrong with these advances and it's part of our consciousness and cultural heritage.

The linear model is based on constancy and stability; it's vertical in terms of career and if you sustain a disciplined, dedicated work ethic you'll be rewarded. Also—this view is normative and prescriptive, meaning that this is how life should unfold for males and females. It provides guidelines for us to achieve our dreams and ambitions. This view identifies a sequence of events for us to experience; a sort of social, developmental timeline with relatively predictable outcomes. It includes gender specific roles and expectations to achieve at certain times in our lives; when to marry for women and men, have children and establish careers. The overarching idea is that one can assume control over change—and when one can't exercise control over change it suggests he/she is powerless or incompetent. Remember—we can control the choices we make but not necessarily the outcomes of our choices.

The Cyclical Model

The cyclical model implies moving in circles—where we repeat familiar patterns such as night and day, work and rest, breakfast and dinner and birth and death. From the cyclical perspective, the purpose of life is to understand the repetitive nature of our impermanent, changing and unfolding lives. We need to consider thinking in cyclical ways to find meaning in the ongoing movement of daily experience. An assumption we make based on this understanding is that the world undoubtedly contains good and evil, black and white, growth and decay, beginning and endings. The inherent polarities in the world necessitates that we perceive cyclical thinking as a process.

The cyclical view takes into account that life is complex, yet fluid and like a stream; flowing and in harmony with nature and its ongoing cycles. From the cyclical perspective human development is adaptable to change; changing ourselves to adapt to our environment. Adaptive adults know that the possibility for discovering more about themselves occurs when they are challenged. Adults who honor the cyclical view also understand that the world is organic and social realities change; that impermanence is visible everywhere. For these individuals, life develops through cycles of change and continuity rather than in progressive, linear ways. In the cyclical model, the same basic themes in life are repeated—such as love, achievement, loss, work and the search for meaning. We repeat life tasks in different ways at different times in the life cycle—work, play, coupling and care. In the end, relationships and choice of work aren't dictated by what stage of life we're in but by our changing commitments to human values that we all share. Remember—attempt to lead a value driven life whereby we honor the enduring sacred values that give meaning and purpose to our lives. The liabilities connected to the linear perspective include feeling incompetent or being a failure when not achieving life cycle milestones. Also—when a crisis emerges it reminds us that life is uncertain and stressors are difficult to overcome. So—if you're unable to achieve in predictable ways, you become discouraged and unhappy. This distorted thinking results from our reliance on linear thinking. We need to modify how we think about life—and renew faith that we can be challenged and overcome difficulties.

