

## HEALTHY AGING — IT'S THE MIND THAT MATTERS

By Ellen Harris, LMHC, CEAP

September is “Healthy Aging” month, and it would behoove all of us to acknowledge the importance of staying healthy as we enter each new stage of life. Things to always remember are to take care of our bodies with healthy diet and exercise, have a willingness to learn new things and make new friends, maintain a strong support system, stay involved in life, and attend to our spiritual needs.

An important aspect of successfully navigating through any life stage is often overlooked. It involves dealing with our *belief system* and learning to recognize how it affects our approach to life. Our beliefs can become roadblocks that stand in our way. They act as blind spots, and prevent us from seeing life through positive, joyous, and hopeful eyes. Unhealthy beliefs can cause despair, anxiety, and depression.

Mark Train tells us, “Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.” We’ve all heard “you’re as young as you feel.” And, it’s oh, so true! How we feel about aging IS an issue of mind over matter. In fact how we feel about almost everything in our lives is an issue of mind over matter. Our minds are powerful and influence our mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. As Charles Swindoll tells us, “Attitude is Everything.” And, so it is!

How we FEEL in our lives is a direct result of our belief system and the thoughts it produces. Most of us are unaware of our belief system and its effects on our attitude, activities, and stress level. We act unconsciously. When we go through life unaware of the root causes of our actions, we continue to re-live and repeat unpleasant scenarios. We worry. We limit ourselves. We don’t realize our mind is simply attempting to rectify some old wound or ineffective, limiting pattern of belief that is rearing its ugly head for healing. We tend to ask, “Why is this happening to me – AGAIN!”

If we want to change what is happening in our lives, the first step is to become aware of how we are feeling. (Are we feeling grouchy, helpless, unsatisfied, or old?) Secondly, we must identify the thought behind the feeling. (What happened to “cause” this feeling? What am I thinking? About myself? About others? About life in general? About the aging process?) Lastly, it’s important to identify the underlying belief behind the thought. (It’s NOT FAIR when people treat me this way! Bad things ALWAYS happen to me! This is the WORST possible scenario! Growing old is TERRIBLE! This is HOPELESS! I’ll NEVER be able to enjoy myself again!)

Ask: Are my thoughts and beliefs rational, realistic, and responsible? Are they helpful or harmful? Is there a better way to look at this situation? This is called “re-framing,” and it is how we transform our beliefs, our thoughts, and ultimately – our lives! If we learn to recognize limited or unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, we can challenge them and replace

them with a more positive outlook. As we do so, our feelings will change. Remember – your feelings are a by-product of your thoughts and beliefs!

Making changes may be one of the most challenging aspects of life – but also the most rewarding. Change may seem frightening. We may feel “stuck.” Think in terms of creating new goals and new habits of behavior. It is helpful to keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings, join a support group, or work with a friend. Take small steps. Make your goals achievable. Congratulate yourself for small successes and forgive yourself for “slip-ups.” Be kind to yourself. Change doesn’t happen overnight!

For more information, call Ellen Harris, LMHC at 239-404-0862.

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