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Learning to let go

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We become old in all the bad senses of the word the minute we refuse to accept the reality of ageing. KUSUM LATA SAWHNEY

Nobody wants to grow old. But if faced without fear, old age can bring happiness and comfort. We tend to cling to our youth by adopting all manner of disguises that are at best superficial. Skirt lengths go up, blouses are smaller, the face and body is reworked and rejigged, and language and mannerisms are spiked with all kinds of youthful jargon and isms. But the fear is deep and to confront it requires a great deal of strength and mental motivation to go beyond the obvious.

Those who let go of their inhibitions, their bitterness and embrace these years head-on can discover the key to a fulfilling old age. While our bodies do age, our emotions and capacity for love and to be loved remains strong. What most of us do not understand is that we become old the moment we refuse to accept ageing. With this thought we immediately stagnate.

Why do people automatically assume that old age means you are useless? "Old age," says Neelam, a sprightly 85-year-old, "is a time that is just as rich and as worthy of being lived as all the other ages in our lives." Between letting go of our youth and accepting our death, there is a time when we can, if dealt with properly, feel deeply happy and free.

According to scientists old age actually begins when our mental abilities start to decline in our twenties! It is interesting to note that most people I spoke to felt that old age does not apply to them. People who are between 30 and 49 feel old age starts at 65, and those between 50 and 64 think 72 is old!

Desperate measures

What is the greatest impediment to accepting our old age? We fear the way others will see us. Thus, we colour our hair so the grey strands do not show, we stretch our foreheads so the lines are not as prominent, we tummy tuck and nip the folding elbow flesh and try and uphold the sagging jaw line that reveals our age to others. We cajole our bodies into tight, figure-hugging garments and consider spandex our best friend and saviour. Thus, through this camouflage we proclaim to the outside world that we possess a young figure but underneath we alone know that it is desperately being held together by sheer will power and elastic!

Acceptance comes with a feeling of great peace. Says 58-year-old Malti, "For years I pushed and prodded my ageing body into a 20-year-old pair of jeans. And was forever miserable. However,

the moment I accepted that I could no longer fit into those pair of trousers and that I was still looking good for my age, I relaxed and my mental defences came down. I realised that I no longer had to keep the same weight as when I was 20. I felt a calm acceptance towards my body and went out and bought a whole new wardrobe.” Once we accept who we are then others learn to accept us for who we are.

The key to a happy old age is to invest in the emotional part of our selves. We might change from the outside but we remain the same way within. You do not have to be only young to have eyes that sparkle even though they have bags, skin that glows even though it is lined, hair that is grey but shines brightly and indulge in conversation that is interesting.

The old have a wealth of experiences they can share if they have the confidence in themselves and interest in others. When you grow old, you develop a new sensibility, and perception, which increases as the body diminishes. There is also a growing detachment from issues such as family, burdens of traditions, and society. Growing old brings with it a rejection of preconceived ideas.

Most of us are unprepared for old age and we fear the unknown. As friends and close relatives die around us, the fear becomes real as we realise we could be next. There is a definite feeling of dread and panic but it is imperative that the old do not cling to this thought and worry for the rest of the time that their death is imminent!

Old age creeps up on you. I have heard many people say this. “One day I was young and the next day I was old.” But you don't just retire from living — you retire from a way of life that has to make way for the slower body. Let go of the niggling insecurities and enjoy the life that is your right. Don't throw it away because it is too precious to waste!