



Aging Stress? Celebrate Every Day! **by award-winning author / stress-relief expert Susie Mantell**

A lot more of the aging process takes place in the head than just hair-loss and henna. In fact, I once wrote a birthday note to a physician friend who knows a lot about healthy aging, that said, "Age is silly... but Birthdays are not." Every life should be celebrated--honored for the achievements of yet another year.

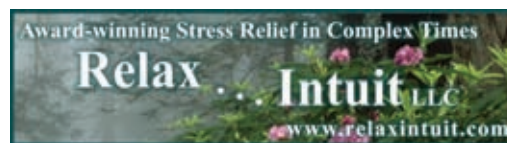
"There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age."
–Sophia Loren

Many perceived age-related limitations are arbitrary, or can be alleviated with a slight modification or a helping hand. New discoveries about what catalyzes changes we've been taught were "the natural aging process" make this truer every day, whether we're 28 or 82. I'm not saying that we will not experience reminders of the effects of Time, (and Gravity), but the Stress associated with all that is another story. Many non-genetically-determined changes actually result from lifestyle choices like how we eat, sleep, breathe and move. Our attitudes, fears and belief systems, and especially what we expect to happen as we grow older will all impact the aging experience.

The degree to which we love, laugh, forgive (or don't) can impact physical and emotional health, the disease and healing processes, and overall quality of life. I know bright, healthy, active 40 year-olds with loving families and 3-week vacations, who are still chronically disappointed, exhausted, angry or depressed. Their conversations are an endless stream of complaints, worries and general negativity. Stress seems to remind them they're Alive. Many of those people either don't exercise or watch nutrition. Others do both, but to punishing extremes. I also know 75 year-olds who still work at demanding jobs, care for grandchildren, enjoy book clubs and lively discussion, brisk walks, art classes, playful, sexy marriages, and would sooner give up a second car than their health club membership!

I could not advise on any of the touted anti-aging or anti-oxidant preparations, HGH or DHEA (hormones) or other biochemical approaches, however you might wish to explore nutritional supplements and vitamins with a licensed healthcare professional. I also cannot recommend any lotions or potions to erase, lift, firm or "rejuvenate." My work is about reducing and relieving the effects of Stress on our health, happiness and quality of life, and how we perceive an event will determine its stress value for us. So let's take a look at reducing some of the largely self-inflicted stress associated with aging.

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Age has never mattered much to me, except for the year I turned 20. I think I didn't want to leave my teens. Not that they were all that wonderful, mind you. I'd just waited so long to get there, and I knew my third decade would bring some big, grown-up challenges. Last month was another of those, "Big" birthdays for me. As it approached, I heard sympathetic groans from friends that led me to ponder some of those cultural fixations, myths and misconceptions that can cause the dreaded, *Age Stress*. A gray hair, smile line or sore shoulder feels like the beginning of the end. I actually learned a lot from this "Big" birthday, and it passed with blessedly little stress and a good deal of joy. Simple thoughtfulness of friends and family made it easier. This one started early, which I now highly recommend! Ten days prior to my big day, a touching email arrived from a very special college friend I haven't seen in years. His kind, inspiring remembrance of this Big Birthday struck nostalgic and celebratory tones that put me in a great Birthday mood, and I was already having fun before I even had time to feel old!

"In the dew of little things, The heart finds its morning and is refreshed." --Kahlil Gibran

Musings On Age, Then & Now:

Then: "I am 5 and $\frac{3}{4}$ and 4 days!"

Now: "Me? uhhhh, in my forties."

Then: "I can't wait 'til I'm all grown-up!"

Now: "I hate aging but it beats the alternative."

Then: "When you're grown-up, you'll understand."

Now: "I just don't understand these kids today."

Then: "When I'm 7? But that will take a whole month!"

Now: "Where did the last 20 years go?"

Then: "I want a big, big cake, a clown, a pony ..."

Now: "Oh, PLEASE don't let the waiters sing!"

Then: "A lady never tells her age."

Now: "I'll be 97 next March!"

Then: "After 40, it's 'patch, patch, patch...'"

Now: "You're as young as you feel!"

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10 Ways to Ensure a Happy Birthday to You!

Tip #1: A month ahead, think about how you'd like to spend your birthday and what would be necessary to make that happen.

Tip #2: Enlist support from people who will understand, and help.

Tip #3: Give yourself a gift. There is something very self-affirming about giving yourself something you long for. Maybe you need a little present. (Who knows your taste better?) Or perhaps some precious time alone, or golf lessons. How about planning a fun creative project as a gift to yourself?

Tip #4: Drop unrealistic expectations. If they aren't met, it's a set-up for disappointment. Instead, help people to remember that your birthday's approaching soon.

Tip #5: If you're one of those people who says, "I hate birthdays," I am asking you to please, please reconsider. Maybe you've been disappointed in the past, or maybe you fear aging. But celebrate your life--that you have touched others' lives, and that you've done a lot of good. These things should be honored.

Tip #6: Remember that 20th birthday I mentioned? I had told everyone I knew to ignore it. (*What did I know? I was 19.*) Well, the big day came and....Nothing. They all did exactly what I wanted. (Well, what I *thought* I wanted.) Needless to say, I learned my lesson.

Tip #7: If it should ever happen that nobody happens to invite you celebrate your day... Don't get mad. Sometimes there's a really good reason. One year I'd been traveling a tremendous amount just prior to my birthday. I thought all I'd want to do that night was catch up on some much-needed sleep. But the afternoon of my birthday I gradually realized I was feeling a little sad about not having accepted birthday invitations. An out-of-town friend suggested I call someone I'd really enjoy having dinner with that night just in case maybe they were free too. I will admit that I felt a little shy about it...but I dialed anyway. Lo-and-behold, he had just gotten into town that afternoon, thought I must already have had plans. He was delighted to have been asked and we had a really fun, impromptu birthday celebration! Most years we don't need hats & horns or parties. We need only to be reminded that our lives have meaning, and we are cared for. You deserve that!

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Tip #8: That day, mention it to everybody you see--the dry cleaner, the grocer. (Try it. It's fun!)

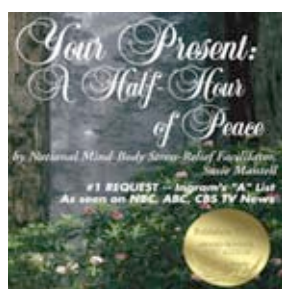
Tip #9: I know someone who takes her birthday off from work every year. She sleeps in, goes shopping, to a movie or museum, has a manicure and writes in her journal over a lovely lunch out. She celebrates with others later but likes to spend that one day making her own fun. Some other people might feel lonely alone, and be happier at work. Think it over, see which type you are and follow your heart.

Tip #10: Enjoy a "Birthday Month." Spread out the fun! Lunch with different friends different days, a walk and a movie with another. Savor it. Look at old photos, reminisce...and plan what's next in your life.

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (Mary Oliver)

Special Note: If, by chance, you truly are one of those rare people who chooses not to track years at all and birthday celebrations are not fun nor meaningful for you, then gently just let those who care about you know that, and let them enjoy and celebrate your presence in their lives in other ways. Age may not matter, but being honored for all the wonderful things you are surely does. . .

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