

Journey into Elderhood: Embracing the Fourth Age

It's not uncommon for individuals to avoid thinking about growing old because it conjures up feelings of dread and anxiety along with images of inactivity, sadness, and decline. The truth is, however, that life can remain rich, satisfying, and meaningful as you age. Each life stage offers challenges, but incredible rewards as well.

Therefore, it is important to view "old age" as one of many transitions in a continuum of life experiences. Those who navigate well through other life transitions will likely have the same experience as they move through the various phases of growing older. The skills, values, interests, and attitudes you accumulate along your life's journey will continue to serve you well in later life.

The secret to successful aging is to always maintain a "future focus" by acknowledging the impact of choices made today on your life in the future. In addition, it is important to seek growth and development in all areas of life throughout adulthood. Those who do will more likely find old age to be a meaningful and purposeful stage of life.

Changing Lifespan Realities

Many experts on aging believe that increasing longevity has moved us from the well accepted three stage model of the lifespan (youth, adulthood, and old age) to a four stage model (youth, adulthood, young-old age, and old-old age).

In addition, gerontologists and human development specialists alike are increasingly referring to the "young-old" period of life as the **Third Age** and the "old-old" period of life as the **Fourth Age**.

The Third Age is typified by an active lifestyle and countless opportunities for new adventures, intellectual stimulation, personal growth, and meaningful contribution. In fact, most Third Agers reject the notion that retirement is synonymous with leisure and instead make a plan to transition to "work" (paid or unpaid) that they find personally rewarding and meaningful. In her book, *Don't Stop the Career Clock*, Helen Harkness Ph.D. wrote,

"By knowing what we want and doing what we love, we can continue life's journey with creativity, wisdom, power, and purpose."

Although it is impossible to assign specific age boundaries, we generally think of the Third Age as ranging from 60 to 80 years old. The Fourth Age usually commences when changing health, capabilities, and circumstances require lifestyle adjustments. However, the Fourth Age is also signaled by a change in focus and perspective: whereas the Third Age is identified by **action**, the Fourth Age is defined by **reflection**.