

# At age 102, this therapist is still psyched

## Therapist Hedda Bolgar sees patients four days a week



Nived Ravikumar for TODAY.com

Bolgar attributes her longevity, in part, to her genes: Her mom lived to 96. (She's also been a vegetarian since 14, loves sleep and doesn't get "anxious about things that haven't happened".)

By Jasmin Aline Persch

Hedda Bolgar's job just doesn't get old. Seeing patients four days a week, the 102-year-old psychologist and psychoanalyst also trains new therapists and has scheduled lectures well into next year.

"I love working with patients," Bolgar told TODAY.com. "I love to listen to them. I love to understand – even when they're not saying it."

Bolgar is the oldest living member of the American Psychology Association. In September, she flew to Washington D.C. to receive an award for America's Outstanding Oldest Worker by Experience Works, a non-profit that helps senior workers.

“She doesn’t let grass grow on her feet,” says Peter Wolson, a psychologist and psychoanalyst who practices and trains students at the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies, an institute Bolgar co-founded in 1970.

In fact, she’s so busy friends have suggested she “get off the horse”, Wolson says. But the sharp, healthy and happy Bolgar doesn’t see why. She’s eternally fascinated by the unconscious, where she says pesky problems hide.

### **Lived through war, famine — and loss of her spouse**

“Ultimately what really interests me is to see people change and have better lives – and feel liberated,” says Bolgar, who says she thinks of her patients even when she’s not with them.

She practices from her home in the tony Brentwood area of Los Angeles, scheduling patients so they never run into each other (people talk). Patients can get cozy in a chair while she sits on a beige couch in her office adorned with flowers and a view of the backyard pool.

Bolgar, born in Switzerland in 1909, usually relates in some way to patients she meets – having lived through war, famine, leaving her country, parents’ divorce and loss of her spouse, friends and pets (she’s kept cats for 40 years and just adopted kittens). The best thing she has done in life, she once said, was marrying her husband, who she calls “the love of my life.”

“When he died, it was really, for many years, the end of the world. My mourning was endless. It seemed endless, until one day I decided I was alive,” Bolgar says in “The Beauty of Aging”, an upcoming film about vivacious women over 80 (<http://www.beautyofaging.com>).

While her patients’ tussles can link to a difficult childhood, Bolgar, who ultimately grew up in Hungary and Austria, can’t even recall fighting at home. She speaks admiringly of her mother, a journalist, and her father, a political ambassador. Bolgar attributes her longevity, in part, to her genes: Her mom lived to 96. (She’s also been a vegetarian since 14, loves sleep and doesn’t get “anxious about things that haven’t happened.”)

### **'Marked my life in a way'**

Bolgar traces her penchant for protecting others to first grade. Another teacher dragged a second grader to her class and asked a question that stumped the older student. Bolgar later boasted to her mother that she supplied the correct answer.

“I went home and felt very proud,” Bolgar says. “She listened. And then asked, ‘Did it ever occur how that other child must have felt?’ I was 6. I’ve never forgotten it. I always thought I was glad she said it. It marked my life in a way.”

Of course, sometimes it happens that the psychotherapist only shares one commonality with a patient: “being human”. That includes a police officer who left the force due to his violent tendencies. The patient, to Bolgar’s surprise, kept his appointments – but to rant, sharing sick hopes of having more altercations.

“You must have had a terrible childhood,” Bolgar recalls telling the ex-police officer one day, after she’d listened extensively. “It was awful. Then he started telling me how awful it was. I was grateful I never had any of those experiences. Everything happened that should never have happened. Then he started to change. He found a girl who was lovely.”

### **'Three weeks to get a dinner date'**

Bolgar, who left the day Hitler marched into Austria, says she’s met a plethora of lovely people herself, especially being welcomed into homes when she first came to the U.S. at 28.



Nived Ravikumar for TODAY.com

Bolgar sees patients four days a week in her Los Angeles home.

Bolgar now generously welcomes people into her home, Wolson says, throwing soirees in her home that has Old European charm with vintage books, paintings and flowers, which she adores, indoors as well as out. She's always outfitted in high fashion, statement earrings and necklace – and a smile.

[Video: 'I'm trying to sell them on old age'](#) (on this page)

“It takes three weeks to get a dinner date with her,” says Allen Yasser, once an intimidated post-doctoral psychology student of Bolgar at Cedar Sinai who has spent 40 Christmases with her.

He's now the director of the Wright Institute of Los Angeles, which they co-founded in 1974 with two other students of hers. She also started the Hedda Bolgar Psychotherapy Clinic, which treats those who can't afford therapy otherwise.

“She has kind of solved the basic problem of getting old, which is isolation. How does she stay tuned in? She has friends in the world,” says 68-year-old Yasser, recalling her recent birthday party with about a 100 people, friends old and new.

Bolgar lives in the present, he says. She e-mails, researches on the Internet and has taught a course via Skype but adores books as well. Bolgar is also tackling current problems in mental health. She launched the Soldiers Project, which offers psychological therapy for soldiers and their families.

“She's not talking about the past is wonderful and the present stinks – a place an older person goes. She really lives for the present and the future. And I think that's somewhat unique for someone her age,” Yasser says.

Wolson, 69, calls Bolgar a “model for everybody”. “She keeps her optimism, her love of life, her vitality,” he says. “She looks at this time as one of the best times in her life – and that amazes me.” Bolgar thrives on new experiences and connecting with the world around her. “I don't know why people are so afraid of being old. It seems to me that what people see only is the loss or the deterioration or the minus – and they don't see that there are tremendous gains,” Bolgar says in the upcoming documentary. “The ease and the security. The feeling of essentially being able to cope.”