

Want To Live To 100? Try To Bounce Back From Stress

by DR. MARK LACHS



Enlarge

Courtesy of Olive Villaluna

Helen Reichert, 109, likes chocolate truffles and drinks Budweiser. She is also adept at moving on after life throws her a curveball.

yoga?

No, Helen Reichert likes chocolate truffles. Her favorite beverage is Budweiser. And she once announced to me that she was thinking about smoking again. When I protested, she reminded me that she has outlived several other physicians and told me to mind my own business.

So what's going on here? Unusual longevity often has a genetic basis, and Reichert probably does have a gene that contributes to her unusual longevity. But she also exhibits a powerful trait geriatricians call adaptive competence.

I define it loosely as the ability to bounce back from stress. Many scientists view this solely as biological stress. But many of us who care for older patients see adaptive competence as psychologically critical as well.

You don't get to be 109 without life hurling a few curveballs at you, and Reichert has had more than her share: bereavement, gender discrimination, medical issues. And after each, she dusts herself off and moves on.

A few years back, she had a modest stroke that affected her language abilities. I don't think I've seen a patient of any age tackle rehabilitation and speech therapy the way she did.

During her last visit, she asked if I would consider taking on

April 11, 2011

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Gerontologist and commentator [Mark Lachs](#) says one of the keys to a long, healthy old age is the ability to keep moving forward after life's inevitable setbacks.

One question I get asked a lot is, "How old is your oldest patient?" Answer: 109.

The next question is usually something like: "What nursing home is he or she in?" Answer: She is living at home, with all her marbles, profoundly engaged in the world around her.

The last question: What is this lady's fountain of youth? A thousand calories a day and an hour of

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a new patient: Her 103-year-old brother, who goes to the office nearly every day. He is another adaptively competent centenarian.

We all know people like this of every age. And we all know the other guy: the pessimist for whom even small disruptions produce out-of-proportion suffering and, dare I say, whining.

Sociologists are studying these traits, and the theory holds up. My colleague Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at the Yale School of Public Health, has studied the longevity of people in their 50s as a function of their perceptions about aging.



Adrian Kinloch

Dr. Mark Lachs says adaptive competence is psychologically critical to longevity.

She asked if they agreed with statements like, "Things keep getting worse as I get older," and, "As you get older you are less useful." Even after she controlled for their medical conditions, subjects who agreed with ideas like these died on average 7 1/2 years sooner than their glass-half-full counterparts.

So if you're a boomer and you don't think your outlook on aging has any impact on the rest of your life, you might want to brighten your attitude a bit.

The other striking thing about Reichert is her self-deprecating sense of humor. A few years ago,

her alma mater, Cornell University, wrote to her.

"You are our oldest living alum, and we're delighted to offer you a lifetime subscription to our magazine," the university said.

Helen scribbled five indignant words on their letter and mailed it back: "How incredibly generous of you!"

Dr. Mark Lachs is director of geriatrics for the New York Presbyterian Health Care System and professor of medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College. He is the author of Treat Me, Not My Age.

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