

Is the Process of Aging Significantly Influenced by Our Mindset?

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What do you think would happen if people in their 70s left their usual environment to live in a house for five days that was created to have all of the trappings of their world from 22 years earlier? Would it change their mindset and emotions about their own aging? Could it actually affect their physical and emotional health? Or would the experience have little, if any, impact?

These questions were triggered by an excellent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, authored by Bruce Grierson, with the provocative title “What if Age Is Nothing but a Mind-Set?” Given my keen interest in mindsets and health, a topic about which I have written frequently, I was immediately drawn to Grierson’s piece. He focused on research conducted by renowned psychologist Ellen Langer of Harvard University. The implications of Langer’s studies are far-reaching and they reinforce my belief that there are many components of our health over which we have more control than we may realize, a position I emphasized in last month’s article “Why Not Choose Health?”

Grierson begins with the following description: “One day in the fall of 1981, eight men in their 70s stepped out of a van in front of a converted monastery in New Hampshire. They shuffled forward, a few of them arthritically stooped, a couple with canes. Then they passed through the door and entered a time warp. Perry Como crooned on a vintage radio. Ed Sullivan welcomed guests on a black-and-white TV. Everything inside—including the books on the shelves and the magazines lying around—were designed to conjure 1959. This was to be the men’s home for five days as they participated in a radical experiment cooked up by a young psychologist Ellen Langer.”

Grierson observes, “The subjects were in good health, but aging had left its mark. ‘This was before 75 was the new 55,’ says Langer. . . . Before arriving, the men were assessed on such measures as dexterity, grip strength, flexibility, hearing and vision, memory and cognition—probably the closest things the gerontologists of the time could come to the testable biomarkers of age.”

These eight men were instructed not to simply reminisce about these earlier years but attempt to *be* the person they were 22 years earlier. Langer informed them, “We have good reason to believe that if you are successful at this, you will feel as you did in 1959.” They were expected to be more independent, and they discussed the sports heroes from 1959 as well as movies and current events from the 50s. “Nothing—no mirrors, no modern-day clothing, no photos except portraits of their much younger selves—spoiled the illusion that they had shaken off 22 years.”

Would You Have Predicted what Happened?

I believe that many of us would not have predicted what transpired during those five days. These eight men were compared with a control group who also came to the monastery, but while asked to reminisce about the past they were not actually instructed to imagine themselves as their younger versions. The experimental group—that is, the group asked to “become” their former selves—outperformed the control group on several measures. “They were suppler, showed greater manual dexterity and sat taller—just as Langer had guessed. Perhaps more improbable, their sight improved. Independent judges said they looked younger.”

Langer concluded, “The experimental subjects had put their minds in an earlier time and their bodies went along for the ride.”

Interestingly, Langer never submitted this research for possible publication in a journal. According to Grierson, she felt it involved a small sample conducted over a very brief period, with “plenty of potentially confounding variables in the design.” In addition, Langer voiced self-consciousness about it. “It was just too different from anything that was being done in the field as I understood it. You have to appreciate, people weren’t talking about mind-body medicine.” Langer also did not attempt to replicate the study given issues of expense and complexity.

However, in 2010 the BBC undertook a re-creation of the 1981 study with Langer serving as a consultant. It was called “The Young Ones” and included six aging former celebrities. They spent a week in a country house that was renovated to replicate the furnishings of 1975. The change in their behavior was noteworthy. “One, who had rolled up in a wheelchair, walked out with a cane. Another, who couldn’t even put his socks on unassisted at the start, hosted the final evening’s party, gliding around with

purpose and vim. The others walked taller and indeed seemed to look younger. They had been pulled out of mothballs and made to feel important again, and perhaps Langer later mused, that rekindling of their egos was central to the reclamation of their bodies.”

Jeffrey Rediger, a psychiatrist at McLean Hospital, a psychiatric hospital affiliated with Harvard Medical School, reflecting on Langer’s work, asserted, “She’s one of the people at Harvard who really gets it, that health and illness are much more rooted in our minds and in our hearts and how we experience ourselves in the world than our models even begin to understand.”

The Role of Placebos

In light of her research Langer proposes that the expectations we hold for ourselves as well as the choices we perceive we have play a significant role in determining the actions we take, including those that impact on our health. To support her position, she highlights the power of placebos. Based on his interview with Langer, Grierson writes, “Placebos aren’t just sugar pills disguised as medicine, though that’s the literal definition; they are any intervention, benign but believed by the recipient to be potent, that produces measurable physiological changes. Placebo effects are a striking phenomenon and still not all that well understood. . . . More traditionally minded health researchers acknowledge the role of placebo effects and account for them in their experiments. But Langer goes well beyond that. She thinks they’re huge—so huge that in many cases they may actually be the main factor producing the results.”

As one example, Langer and one of her students, Alia Crum, published a study in the journal *Psychological Science* that involved 84 hotel chambermaids who reported that they did not engage in much exercise during a typical week. The experimental group was told that in fact their cleaning rooms involved significant exercise, as much if not more so than that recommended by the surgeon general. Incredibly, given this information that served to shift their perceptions and expectations about their work, these maids not only lost weight compared with a control group, but they also showed improvement on other indicators such as body mass index and hip-to-waist ratio. It was noted, “All other factors were held constant. The only difference was the change in mind-set.”

Not unexpectedly, there were critics of this study who searched for statistical errors or other experimental artifacts to explain an outcome that seemed to “defy

physics.” Langer asserts, “If current-day physics can’t explain these things, maybe there are changes that need to be made in physics.”

To Avoid an Accusatory Position

Related studies undertaken or planned by Langer are cited in the Grierson article. They have and will continue to elicit controversy in terms of their experimental design and the conclusions that are drawn from the findings. As my readers are well aware, I certainly believe our mindset is intimately tied to our expectations, our behaviors, and our physical and emotional well-being. Our perception of events that impact on our lives and the words we use to describe these events can serve as significant determinants of the outcome of these events. Relatedly, my clinical interventions are rooted, in part, in assisting patients to change negative mindsets that represent a victim’s mentality that contribute to self-defeating behaviors into a mindset associated with taking constructive, realistic actions to address challenges in one’s life.

However, as Langer discovered, one must be careful not to advance the belief that poor medical or psychological outcomes may be associated with the person harboring a victim’s mentality. She told Grierson of a yet-to-be-published study that found that survivors of breast-cancer who described themselves as “in remission” showed poorer general health and experienced more pain than those who viewed themselves as “cured.” Langer also takes issue with the use of words such as “fighting” a “chronic disease.” She argues, “When you’re saying ‘fighting,’ you’ve already acknowledging the adversary is very powerful. ‘Chronic is understood as ‘uncontrollable’—and that’s not something anyone can know.”

There is no denying the influence of words and mindsets, but in reading Langer’s quotes I was concerned that her position could easily be interpreted as suggesting that those who died from cancer or other life-threatening diseases did so because they were dominated with pessimistic thoughts and expectations. While I have written that we are the “authors of our own lives,” I recognize that there are times when even an optimistic attitude accompanied with constructive actions and courage will not achieve the desired outcome of overcoming a particular disease or situation.

Grierson ended his article with an account of a man who attended a presentation offered by Langer in which she argued that when we use the word “fighting” to describe

our response to cancer we actually turn over power to the disease. He angrily told Langer that his wife had died of breast cancer. Langer reported, “He said she had fought it, and I made it seem that it was her fault.”

Langer apologized to this man, replying, “Those are good points, and I’m sorry I didn’t address them. But let me explain to you that it’s the culture that teaches us that we have no control. I’m not blaming your wife. I’m blaming the culture.” I’m not certain how helpful this distinction was to this man. However, Langer is hopeful that someday we will shift from an atmosphere of blame and turn our attention to the power that can be harnessed in our minds, a force that she believes is far more potent than we realize. However, I would argue that even as we come to appreciate the power of our mindsets, we must also recognize that this power has certain boundaries and limits. If this recognition is lost, we are likely to convey messages that are interpreted as accusatory and judgmental.

A Concluding Thought

The findings from Langer’s studies and her interpretation of these findings are intriguing and controversial. While many people may voice reasonable reservations about her interpretations of the data, these reservations should not lead to a dismissal of her point of view. I think we have much to learn about the ways and extent to which our mindsets play a role in determining our behaviors and our physical and emotional health. An understanding of this role can provide guideposts for developing outlooks that eventuate in a healthy lifestyle, one in which we assume realistic responsibility for what transpires in our lives rather than fall victim to pessimism and helplessness.

I believe that eight men in New Hampshire and six men in Great Britain “transported” back 22 and 35 years, respectively, would attest to the power of mindsets in improving their perspective and their health. Perhaps there is a great deal we can all learn from their experience.