

ACT YOUR AGE ▲

Cyndy Muscatel

Since I was five, people have been telling me to act my age. In my seventies, it still goes on. I realized this when I went on a health kick a couple of months ago.

First, I signed up for Weight Watchers, keeping track of what I ate. That was good but nerve-racking. There are never enough points for my martini. What got me in trouble was the exercise component. I read an article that said interval training was the only way to go—that I should add running into my walk. So I did. I also increased my steps to 13,000, started working out with a trainer, as well as doing Pilates and yoga.

All was good for about two weeks. My shoulders hurt from doing the plank, but it was bearable. Then I got plantar fasciitis. (Now, we're talking painful!) The podiatrist made me a brace, gave me a cortisone shot, prescribed Aleve and a physical therapist.

I got better. Feeling invincible, I went back to my routine. A week later, my left knee and hamstring started to hurt. I ignored the pain even though it woke me at night. When I went to the physical therapist, she kindly explained interval training for a senior.

“Cyndy,” she said, “your joints are in their seventies. Leave them alone. At your age, just getting mad at your husband can raise your heart rate enough.”

In other words, I should act my age.

She told me to rest my knee, use ice, and get a knee brace. For three weeks, I followed her advice exactly. I became the sedentary couch potato I was afraid of, but slowly the pain lessened.

Meanwhile, I tried making a deal with my Higher Power. “I know I’ve overdone it. I get it now,” I said. “Please, if I can just get better, I won’t do it again.”

After a month, I returned to my walk—more slowly and less far. But at least I was outside and moving. Even if it hurt, especially at night when I turned over, I could deal.

One day as I was walking the dog, my neighbor stopped to ask why I was wearing the brace.

“I hurt my knee about six weeks ago,” I said.

“Have you gone to a doctor?” he asked.

“The acupuncture doctor. I don’t want to go to an orthopedic surgeon because they always want to cut,” I explained.

My neighbor rolled his eyes. “Go see Dr. Anderson. He’s good, and he won’t suggest surgery unless you really need it.”

Going to Dr. Anderson was **Reality Check #1**. (Truly more like that slap in the face they do in the movies to wake a person up.) First, it was the X-rays.

“See how close your bones are? We call that kissing cousins,” Dr. Anderson said, pointing to my svelte bones on the X-ray.

When the MRI showed three meniscus tears plus the arthritis, even I could see positive thoughts weren't enough. The truth? My joints are in the late autumn of their years, even if my mind said they were in midsummer. After having my first Synvisc shot, I left the doctor's office wearing the Medicare-prescribed brace that's so large it needs its own seat on an airplane. Synvisc, BTW, is a gel that supplements my synovial fluid, which has gone bye-bye.

Next stop on my **Reality Train** was going over my physical's test results with my new primary care physician.

“For your age,” the doctor told me, “you're really quite healthy. Your carotid artery is only 25% blocked. And your left ventricle is functioning at 65%.”

That didn't sound so good to me. I've always been a 100% kind of person.

“For my age, what about any age?” I asked.

“You have to be realistic. You're doing great for your age,” she said.

In other words, act my age and don't expect so much.

I looked at her. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be fifty pretty soon,” she said as if she would soon be the Ancient Mariner.

Okay, I thought, I’m beginning to get the picture. Statistically, I fall into the category of elderly, and that’s how the doctors respond. While I was thinking old age started at ninety, the U.S. Census defined it as seventy-four. So if I have indigestion, the docs insist I have an echocardiogram. If I have headaches, they order a brain scan.

In our society, we treat aging as if it’s an affliction, like you have something wrong with you. “The English language seems to lack appropriate, positive terminology for referencing aging in a way that recognizes the strength, wisdom, and often privilege associated with chronological age,” Alison Taylor, on the October 2011 British Columbia Law Institute website, said. She suggested using the term OLDER PERSON instead of ELDERLY, and presented three categories of aging: younger old (65-74), the old (75-84), and the oldest old (85 plus). “...the practice of dividing aging into three categories reminds us of the diversity of the experience of aging and the misleading aspects of using one term to denote age,” she explained.

When I turned seventy, I think it freaked my kids out. They had T-shirts made with a picture of me at forty-one and the slogan, “The Future Is Still Bright.” That said it all: They thought I was done for. In their eyes, all I could look forward to was the dimness of senility along with the

loss of memory, height, ability, validity, and vitality. I felt ashamed of my aging self and went into denial. Seventy was the new fifty, right?

But **Reality Check Three** was waiting. It occurred recently in Seattle, where I grew up. I was having coffee at Starbucks when I looked over and saw an old woman smiling at me. I smiled back, and she came over.

“I thought that was you!” she said.

My eyes bugged out as I recognized her. It was my old friend Barbara from high school. *The old woman was my age! Could it be that I looked like an old lady too?*

I’ve fought off the signs of aging for years: a little nip, a little tuck, Pilates, yoga, and workouts to keep me fit and flexible. I eat healthy, and play brain games on the computer to keep my mind sharp. Being a writer, I can continue to ply my craft, which keeps me sharp and engaged. I also try to stay current. (I’m so cool, I text my five grandkids rather than call them.)

But facts are facts. I’m a half-inch shorter and a half a step slower. I can’t multitask anymore, I drive like the little old lady from Pasadena, and I’m loving my power nap. When I’m overwhelmed, senior moments aren’t far behind. Also, I’d much rather stay home with a good book and watch the sunset than go party.

I guess these last months have been a good learning experience (sort of like the Ice Bucket Challenge). I don’t

love any of it, but it's made me stop avoiding the truth: I'm older. I used to say that aging was about accepting limitations without letting them limit you. Now I say it's about accepting reality and going with it. In life there's always give-and-take. I'd like to age nicely and sensibly—I don't want to be marginalized. I want to keep being me, not be seen as part of a statistical category. This is where it can get confusing—sometimes I feel that I've lost myself and who I've always been. My self concept didn't include being elderly.

But I can be old without being elderly. I will stay engaged in life and keep relevant. (Luckily I have grandchildren who help with that). I'm also going to learn how to ask for help and accept it. If someone offers me their seat on the Metro, I might even take it. Or if someone wants to help me with my groceries, I can say yes, without being offended.

By accepting I'm entering the winter of my years, I have a freedom I've never had before. I grew up in an era where women had to be beautiful, smart, and as capable in the workplace as in the kitchen. We were Superwomen who thought we had to do it all. Now I can slow down. I don't have to prove myself anymore, so I can stop pushing myself to the limit.

I've found one of the best things about being older is I don't really care what others think of me. My attitude is: *This is who I am. Like me as I am or don't.* My task is to let go of my middleaged self image and embrace the newest version of Me—to act my age. I need to be one of those who likes me as I am. It's a work in progress.