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PENGUIN LIFE

The Changing Mind

‘The secrets of ageing well ... Daniel Levitin is a distinguished American neuroscientist and this is a serious, evidence-based guide to what really works and why’ *Sunday Times*

‘A fact-filled and optimistic guide to ageing well ... Levitin is an invaluable kind of scientist ... *The Changing Mind* is replete with curious facts ... Optimism is a life-preserver. His book bubbles with it. Levitin makes a strong case for the consolations if not the joys of age’ John Sutherland, *The Times*

‘Optimistic in tone ... Levitin loves to tell stories ... he’s a good companion’ *Evening Standard*

‘Comprehensive and fascinating insight into the evolving human brain. This book could change your life’ Professor Stephen Westaby, author of *Fragile Lives*

‘None of us can afford to ignore Daniel Levitin’s *The Changing Mind* ... The good news is that it’s not all downhill: according to Levitin our decision-making skills and happiness levels actually increase in later life’ *New Statesman*

‘The idea that your mind has to decline with age is false – and there is plenty we can do to keep it sharp’ *Sunday Telegraph*

‘A truly eye-opening read that challenges our assumptions about the ageing process’
Liz Earle

‘Neuroscientist Levitin delves into the multiple-trace theory of memory, the ageing microbiome, fats and the brain, the impacts of neural implants and the joys of non-retirement. A clear-eyed, insightful overview of the neurophysiological healthspan’
Nature

‘Delivers welcome news about the ageing brain: it is happier, quicker and often much healthier than you may imagine’ *New Scientist*

‘Daniel Levitin explores a wealth of information on the complex biology of ageing and presents it in an engaging and accessible manner. Writing with insight, compassion and gentle humour he shows us the positive side of the ageing process and how to make the most of the future that awaits us’ Drs Pamela Hartzband and Jerome Groopman, professors, Harvard Medical School, authors of *Your Medical Mind*

‘Daniel Levitin’s refreshing perspective on ageing will change your opinion on this unique phase of life and challenge the “slowing down” stereotype. Using a scientific and thoroughly engaging approach, Levitin convinces us that with medical advances alongside positive lifestyle changes described in this book, we can all look forward to

older age as a fulfilling and exciting chapter in our lives' Dr Rupy Aujla, author of *The Doctor's Kitchen*

'This is a book that can make things feel a whole lot brighter' *Big Issue*

'If you're planning to age, read this book. Wise, sensitive and insightful, Levitin shares the tools that allow you to optimize the process' David Eagleman, author of *The Brain*

'Growing old may be the only event in life that is both desired and feared. Daniel Levitin alleviates the fear with sound advice that can tilt the balance so that we have more healthy years and fewer sick ones. The brilliance of this book is that Levitin not only tells us what to do and what not to do – he gracefully and eloquently shares the science behind how we can change our minds and brains, and how even small changes can reap large benefits. Share this book – especially with anyone you hope to grow old with' Diane Halpern, past president of the American Psychological Association, professor, Claremont McKenna College

'A wise, insightful and beautifully written book on how we can navigate the waters of time. Helpful for readers at any age' Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

'Tomorrow you and I will be older than we are today. That's why you, I and everyone we know needs this remarkable book. With a scientist's rigour and a storyteller's flair, Daniel Levitin offers a fresh approach to growing older. He debunks the idea that ageing inevitably brings infirmity and unhappiness and instead offers a trove of practical, evidence-based guidance for living longer and better. *The Changing Mind* is an essential book for the rest of your life' Daniel H. Pink, author of *When and Drive*

'A compelling primer on our amazingly dynamic brains and the steps we can all take to harness that potential' Dr Rahul Jandial, author of *Life Lessons from a Brain Surgeon*

'An uplifting exploration of the brain and how it does not age as we often fear' Camilla Cavendish, author of *Extra Time*

'As always, Dan shows his great facility for pulling together different parts of our field and explaining them in a way that makes them accessible to all' Brenda Milner, at age 101, professor of neurology, McGill University, professor of psychology, Montreal Neurological Institute, winner of the Kavli Prize in neuroscience, founder of the field of neuropsychology

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This is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a Human Obsession

The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature

The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload

A Field Guide to Lies: A Neuroscientist on How to Make Sense of a Complex World

To my sweet wife, Heather, who never gets old

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Introduction

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote that one should not go gently into that good night, that old age should burn and rage at close of day. As a younger man reading that poem, I saw futility in those words. I saw aging only as a failing: a failing of the body, of the mind, and even of the spirit. I saw my grandfather suffer aches and pains. Once agile and proudly self-sufficient, by his sixties he struggled to swing a hammer and was unable to read the label on a box of Triscuit crackers without his glasses. I listened as my grandmother forgot words, and I cried when eventually she forgot what year it was.

At work, I watched as people neared retirement age, the spark gone from their eyes, the hope from their smiles, counting the days until they could walk away from it all, yet with only the vaguest plans about what they would do once they had so much free time, all day, every day.

But as I've grown older myself, and have spent more time with people who are in the last quarter of their lives, I've seen a different side of aging. My parents are now in their mideighties and are as engaged with life as they have ever been, immersed in social interactions, spiritual pursuits, hiking, and nature, and even starting new professional projects. They look old, but they feel like the same people they were fifty years ago, and this amazes them. Where certain faculties have slowed, they find that extraordinary compensatory mechanisms have kicked in—positive changes in mood and outlook, punctuated by the exceptional benefits of experience. Yes, older minds might process information more slowly than younger ones, but they can intuitively synthesize a lifetime of information and make smarter decisions based on decades of learning from their mistakes. Among the many advantages of being old, they are less fearful of calamities because they've been dealt a few in the past and managed to work through them. Resilience—both their own and each other's—is something they know they can count on. At the same time, they are comfortable with the idea that they may die soon. That's not the same as saying they want to die, but they no longer fear it. They've lived full lives and treat each new day as an opportunity for new experiences.

Brain researchers speculate that old age brings chemical changes in the brain that make it easier to accept death—to feel at ease with it rather than be frightened by it. As a neuroscientist, I've wondered why some people seem to age better than others. Is it genetics, personality, socioeconomic status, or just plain dumb luck? What is going on in the brain that drives these changes? What can we do to stem the cognitive and physical slowdown that accompanies aging? Many people thrive well into their eighties and nineties, while others seem to retreat from life, prisoners of their own infirmities, socially isolated and unhappy. How much control do we have over our outcomes, and how much is predetermined?

Marrying recent research in developmental neuroscience with the psychology of individual differences, *The Changing Mind* sets out a new approach to how we think about our final decades. Drawing from diverse disciplines, this book demonstrates that

aging is not simply a period of decay, but a unique developmental stage that—like infancy or adolescence—brings with it its own demands and its own advantages.

The book will show that how well we age depends on two parallel streams:

1. the confluence of a number of factors reaching back into our childhoods; and
2. our responses to stimuli in our environments, and shifts in our individual habits.

This provocative argument can revolutionize the way we plan for old age as individuals, family members, and citizens in industrial societies where the average life expectancy continues to rise. It offers choices we can make that will keep us mentally agile well into our eighties, nineties, and perhaps beyond. We need not stumble, stooped and passive, into that good night; we can live it up.



Two of the teachers I had in college are now in their eighties and another is in his nineties. All are still active and whip-smart. One of them, Lewis R. Goldberg, now eighty-seven, is considered the father of modern-day scientific conceptions of personality—the unique compendium of traits and features that set us apart from one another and that can profoundly influence the course of our lives. He has found that personalities can change: You can improve yourself at any stage of life, becoming more conscientious, agreeable, humble—any number of things. This is surprising, and it upends decades of casual speculation. We tend to think of personality traits as being durable, persisting forever. (Think of the curmudgeon Larry David in TV’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.) But personality traits are also malleable. And the degree to which habitual traits drive our behavior is influenced by the situations we find ourselves in and by our own striving to improve ourselves, to become better people.

The darker side of this, unfortunately, is that some encounters and environments can cause our personalities to change for the worse. Learning how to avoid certain environments, habits, and stimuli that influence our personalities in negative ways is a crucial part of aging well. This potential malleability of personality as we age is essential to understand. Dark shifts in personality are, regrettably, all too common in our world. We all know of people who have grown bitter, isolated, or depressed as they got older.

Much of this is culturally driven. In the 1960s, when I grew up, many young people couldn’t wait to push old people out of the way. For all the tolerance, peace, and love that our Woodstock generation espoused, we were quick to try to sideline our parents’ generation. We chanted, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” and we might as well have chanted, “Don’t even *pay attention* to anyone over seventy.” Roger Daltrey of the Who summed up a pervasive sense of derision toward the elderly when he sang, “I hope I die before I get old.” My friends who were born in the 1930s and 1940s have shared with me stories of indignities, prejudices, and disrespect shown toward them by people of my generation.

Aging, as it has been depicted in the media and our collective consciousness for centuries, implies both physical and emotional pain and, in many cases, social isolation. As the body became more frail, intellectual faculties weakened, and diminished vision and hearing prevented the elderly from engaging with their communities as they once did. Retirement spelled the end of life’s purpose and, sadly, seemed to accelerate the end of one’s life.

My grandfather, a first-generation college student who worked his way through medical school to become one of the first radiologists in California, was pushed out of

the very department he founded at his hospital, just because he turned sixty-five. From what we know today about diagnostic radiology, he was probably better at his job at sixty-five than when he was younger, because so much of it depends on pattern-matching circuits in the brain that improve with experience. The sense of marginalization and uselessness my grandfather experienced in the workplace was opposite what he had with us at home in the family—we loved and venerated him, and we were devastated when he died at sixty-seven. In a letter he wrote to the family before the surgery that ultimately cost him his life, he expressed deep sadness about the “loss of respect” for him at the hospital. I always suspected that this loss of respect had an impact on his stamina, resilience, and mood to such a degree that a minor surgical complication cost him his life.

I want to draw out explicitly what happens in the brain when we feel rejected or underappreciated. Our bodies react to insults, both psychological and physical, by releasing cortisol, the stress hormone. Cortisol is very useful if you need to invoke the fight-or-flight response—say, when you’re confronted by an attacking tiger—but it is not so useful when you’re dealing with longer-term psychological challenges such as loss of respect. The cortisol-induced stress reaction reduces immune-system function, libido, and digestion. This is why, when you’re stressed, you might have an upset stomach. It makes sense for the fight-or-flight response to do this: It needs to direct all your resources to the temporary state of physically dealing with an imminent threat. But the psychological stresses that can come from interpersonal conflicts, left unresolved, can leave us in a physiologically stressed state for months or years. In contrast, when we’re actively engaged and excited about life, our levels of mood-enhancing hormones such as serotonin and dopamine increase, and the production of NK (natural killer) and T cells (lymphocytes) also increases, strengthening our immune systems and cellular repair mechanisms. My grandmother, my family, and I might have enjoyed my grandfather’s company a lot longer if social stressors hadn’t come into play.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. My own father, a businessman, was strongly encouraged to retire when he was sixty-two, to make way for someone younger. Like his father before him, he felt pushed out and began to question his self-worth. His social world shrank, he began to suffer physical ailments, and he became depressed. But by then, in 1995, the tide was already turning. Society and employers were awakening to the Eastern idea that the elderly may be not only of some value, but of superior value. My father put out feelers and was offered a job teaching a course at the USC Marshall School of Business. Soon he was teaching a full load of four courses per semester. That was twenty-five years ago. My father just signed a four-year renewal to teach until he’s eighty-nine. The students love him because he is able to pass on his real-world experience to them in a way that younger professors can’t. And by the way, that depression and those physical ailments were dramatically reduced once he found meaningful work.



Of course, finding ways to stay active and engaged is not always easy in old age, and it doesn’t completely compensate for biological decline. But new medical advances and positive lifestyle changes can help us to find enhanced fulfillment in life where previous generations may not have been able to do so.

When I was in college, one of my favorite professors was John R. Pierce, a former director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the inventor of satellite telecommunication,

a prolific sci-fi writer, and the person who named the transistor when a team under his supervision invented it. I met him when he was eighty, in the second iteration of his “retirement,” giving classes on sound and vibration. He invited me to dinner at his house once; we became friends and went out to dinner regularly. Around the time John turned eighty-seven, he grew depressed. One of the pastimes he enjoyed most was reading, but now his eyesight was failing. I bought him some large-type books and that perked him up for a few weeks, but much of what he wanted to read—technical books, science fiction—was not available in large type. I’d go over and read to him when I could, and I arranged for some Stanford students to do the same. But he still kept slipping. Then he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. His shaking bothered him. His memory was failing. He no longer found pleasure in things that he used to enjoy. And he was growing increasingly disoriented.

I suggested that he ask his doctor about taking Prozac, which was new at the time, and just being prescribed for the kinds of age-related problems he was facing. (Prozac helps to boost levels of serotonin in the brain—one of those mood-enhancing hormones I mentioned previously.) It was transformative. Although it didn’t help the Parkinson’s specifically, his attitude changed. He felt younger. He started holding dinner parties again, and lecturing to students, something he had given up doing just a year earlier. A simple chemical change in his brain gave him a second wind. John lived to ninety-two, and much of those last five years were filled with joy and satisfaction for him. And for me, too—it felt like getting a second chance with my grandfather who had died too soon.

I saw John two weeks before he passed at age ninety-two, and he was excitedly planning some new experiments he wanted to do. That’s the way to go out.

At the time I knew John, I was young and not thinking about my own inevitable aging. But in the decades since then, in experiencing my own gradual mood shifts and in talking to a great many research colleagues and doctors, I’ve come to see a future in which we can plan ahead to fend off some of the adverse effects of aging; a future in which we can harness what we know about neuroplasticity to write our own next chapters the way we want them to come out; a future in which healthy lifestyle choices and a broader use of antidepressants and other medications can temper or reverse the effects of depression and other changes in mood that we have for too long assumed were an irreversible part of the aging process. In addition, new innovations in medical science and treatment protocols are sure to become available.

For example, recent discoveries about changes in sleep chemistry and neuronal waveforms suggest a different approach to this most basic of human activities. Sleep deprivation at any age is bad for you. It has been tied to diabetes in pregnancy, postpartum depression in new fathers, and bipolar disorder at all ages.^{1, 2} You may have read that “old people” don’t need as much sleep as young people and can get by on four or five hours a night. This myth has recently been exposed by Matthew Walker at UC Berkeley. It’s not that we need less sleep as we get older—it’s that changes in the aging brain make it difficult for older adults to get the sleep they need. And the consequences are serious. Sleep deprivation in the aged is directly responsible for cognitive decline, not to mention increased risk of cancer and heart disease. Grandma didn’t forget where she put her glasses because she’s senile—it’s because she’s sleep-deprived. Walker has found evidence that sleep deprivation increases the risk of Alzheimer’s.

Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is now the third leading cause of death in the United States.³ This doesn’t mean we should jump to the conclusion that there is an epidemic

in the making, or that environmental toxins are causing it. They might be, but AD is primarily an old person's disease; medical advances have made it so that we are living longer, and that means we are living long enough to *get* Alzheimer's. Now, for reasons we don't yet understand, AD is selective with regard to sex. Sixty-five percent of patients are women, and a woman's chances of getting AD now exceed her chances of getting breast cancer.

Approximately two-thirds of the overall risk that you'll get Alzheimer's comes from your genes, with the remaining one-third associated with environmental factors such as whether or not you have a history of depression or head injuries.⁴ In this way, events of childhood can have an effect many, many decades later. Recent science demonstrates that environmental stimuli, behavior, and luck all play a role, as I will show throughout the book. On the biological side, a brain with Alzheimer's is easily recognized by the shrinkage of the hippocampus—the seat of memory—and of the outer layers of the cerebral cortex (the part of the brain associated with complex thought and movements). You may have heard of amyloids, aggregates of proteins that have been found in the brains of Alzheimer's patients. One particular protein, beta-amyloid, begins destroying synapses (connections between the brain's neurons) before it clumps into plaques that cause the death of neurons themselves.

Dale Bredeesen, a neurologist who studied under my colleague Stan Prusiner at UCSF, has studied these interacting factors for thirty years. His Bredeesen Protocol is the topic of a *New York Times* bestseller. Fending off Alzheimer's, he says, involves five key components: a diet rich in vegetables and good fats, oxygenating the blood through moderate exercise, brain training exercises, good sleep hygiene, and a regimen of supplements individually tailored to each person's own needs, based on blood and genetic testing. The Bredeesen Protocol is still in its early stages of validation—the primary proof of concept was based on only ten patients. The patients have to be in very early stages of Alzheimer's. And since the protocol is new, they haven't had anyone on it for more than five years. The protocol may or may not help, but at least the first four parts won't cause any harm—we don't know enough about the supplements—and to many it makes sense to start following these healthy lifestyle practices on the chance that they will end up being scientifically validated.

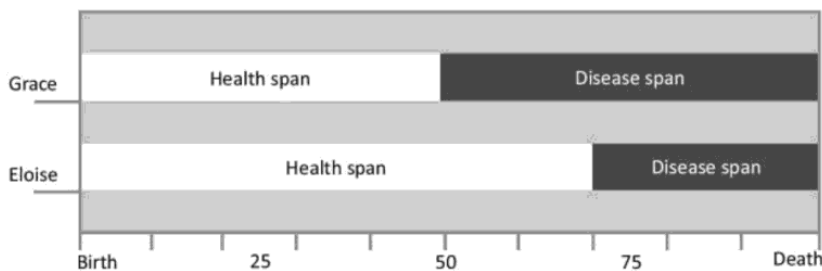
Prusiner won the Nobel Prize for discovering prions, proteins that can accumulate and cause neurodegenerative diseases like Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a fatal condition that is characterized by memory loss and behavioral changes. Sound familiar? These are the markers of Alzheimer's, of course, and Prusiner now believes that prions, because they can assemble into amyloid fibrils, are responsible for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. At the cutting edge of this research is the idea of neuroinflammation as a precursor to Alzheimer's, appearing long before clinical signs and symptoms. This is because the visible symptoms appear only during the actual destruction of brain regions—the cognitive effects we notice, such as memory loss and mood change, reflect relatively late stages of the underlying disease process. Depressive-like symptoms, such as loss of interest and energy, often appear long before other, more serious manifestations.

Several teams of scientists have found that a chronic inflammatory process precedes the onset of Alzheimer's, and this strongly suggests a potential health-care strategy involving anti-inflammatory drugs, one that we might see in widespread use in the next few years.⁵ Current research is focused on whether anti-inflammatories (such as ibuprofen) can ease symptoms once they've arrived, or whether the drugs must be given before the onset of symptoms and thus act as a preventative (which is appearing

to be the case). Another cutting-edge treatment being investigated involves immunization with antibodies that can prevent the formation of amyloid fibrils in the first place.⁶

We talk about life span as the length of time that one is alive. Except for cases of death by accident, most of us will die of some kind of disease, or our parts will just wear out. You can think of the time line of your life span as being divided into two parts: the period of time that you're generally healthy (the health span) and the period of time that you're sick (the disease span). Obviously, it is important to minimize the disease span.

Consider two friends who die at one hundred, both with identical life spans but very different disease spans. Grace begins a gradual health decline at fifty and by eighty requires twenty-four-hour care. Eloise begins to decline at seventy but the real health problems don't kick in until ninety-five. All of us would prefer to have that extra twenty years of smooth sailing, followed by an extra fifteen years of happy life before disease limits our activities. I wrote this book on the premise that it is never too late to tilt the balance in our favor, to increase our health span by making important changes to how we approach aging.



The environmental factors I've described here can have either a positive or negative impact on the way we experience old age—our engagement with the world, our habits, our will to live, and medicine. A second strand of the narrative for *The Changing Mind* is the developmental side, a story that begins, ironically, in childhood.

I mentioned earlier that social stress can lead to a compromised immune system. That happens at any age. Michael Meaney at McGill University showed that the kind of care a mother gives to her offspring alters the chemistry of the DNA in certain genes involved in physiological stress responses. Rat pups who are licked more in the first six days of life grow into adult rats who are far more secure and less likely to be afflicted with stress. In particular, those baby rats that received a great deal of licking and grooming produced fewer stress hormones when dealing with a challenging or stressful situation than the rats who received less care, and here's the kicker: The effects held well into adulthood.⁷

Meaney has gone on to show comparable effects in humans, and the opposite set of outcomes for children who are neglected or abused as infants. In the stress story, early experience interacts with genetics and brain structure. "Women's health is critical," Meaney says.⁸ "The single most important factor determining the quality of mother-offspring interactions is the mental and physical health of the mother. This is equally true for rats, monkeys and humans." Parents living in poverty, suffering from mental illness, or facing great stress are much more likely to be fatigued, irritable, and anxious. "These states clearly compromise the interactions between parents and their children," he says. And, subsequently, they compromise their children's brain chemistry and resilience in the face of setbacks—even future ones.

Meaney emphasizes that "human brain development occurs within a socioeconomic

context, and childhood socioeconomic status (SES) influences neural development—particularly of the systems that subserve language and executive function” (deciding what to do next and then doing it). Research has shown the importance of prenatal factors, parent-child interactions, and cognitive stimulation in the home environment in promoting healthy, lifelong neural development. These findings should direct us toward improving the programs and policies that are designed to alleviate SES-related disparities in mental health and academic achievement.

Nurture (or lack thereof) early in life affects the development of a number of brain systems selectively, such as glucocorticoid (GLUCO-cortico-oid) receptors in the hippocampus, which are a primary component of the stress response, part of the feedback mechanism in the immune system that reduces inflammation. Meaney also showed that parenting affects the function of the pituitary and adrenal glands, which regulate growth, sexual function, and the production of cortisol and adrenaline. Early traumas can last a lifetime. They can be overcome with the right behavioral and pharmacological interventions, but it takes some work. More cuddles and hugs go a long way, particularly in the vulnerable first year of life. As parents (and grandparents and teachers), our choices about how we raise our children in their first years will have a far greater impact on what their last years look like than we might previously have recognized.

A third strand of *The Changing Mind*, along with environmental influences and neural development, is that I’ve come to see old age as a unique period of growth, a life stage with its own distinct character, rather than a period of decline or a gradual turning down of the dials and knobs one by one.

When many of us think of aging, what first comes to mind might be a panoply of age-related problems that we’re all familiar with: loss of vision, loss of hearing, aches and pains. What exactly happens when the brain and body age—what physiological changes affect our experience of ourselves and others? I’ll delve into these questions in this book, including brain cell atrophy, DNA sequence damage, compromised cellular repair functions, and neurochemical and hormonal changes.

I’ll also explore some effects that are just as common but less talked about. For example, most of us experience metabolic changes that mean you can’t just continue eating the same things you’ve always eaten and maintain your weight or your figure. We may become lactose intolerant. (Evolutionary forces were mainly concerned with digesting mother’s milk when we’re young, not eating ice cream when we’re fifty.) Our digestive system experiences changes that, along with causing lactose intolerance, may make us gassier as we age. Our skin becomes drier. Our eyes become drier. Caffeine may affect us differently or stop providing its beneficial effects entirely. Processing refined sugar becomes more difficult as our pancreas ages. *The Changing Mind* will tell you what to expect, or perhaps explain some of the things you’re already experiencing. But this is not a book about problems. My goal is to provide some solutions, guidelines, and helpful tips from the cutting edge of scientific medicine about how to live fully and happily, in a way that pushes these infirmities and indignities to the background and allows us to fully experience the meaningful things in the third act of our lives.



Now that the Woodstock generation is entering our sixties and seventies, we have a chance to change the status quo about the role older people play in daily life. Of course, this satisfies our own self-interest, but, more important, it can help to rekindle our generation’s ideal of improving society, ideals like respecting the planet and all the

living beings who call it home, helping those less fortunate than ourselves, promoting tolerance and inclusiveness, and allowing people who are different from us to embrace, not be embarrassed by, those differences.

The cost of sidelining the elderly is enormous in lost economic and artistic productivity, severed family connections, and diminished opportunities. We can begin to model better behavior by embracing those who are a generation ahead of us—our parents' generation. And we can adopt practices that will keep us, as older beings, relevant and engaged with others well into our eighties and nineties ... and perhaps beyond. I argue here for a very different vision of old age, one that sees our final decades as a period of blossoming, a resurgence of life that does not chase after our younger years, but instead embraces the gifts that time can bring.

What would it mean for all of us to think of the elderly as resource rather than burden and of aging as culmination rather than denouement? It would mean harnessing a human resource that is being wasted or, at best, underutilized. It would promote stronger family bonds and stronger bonds of friendship among us all. It would mean that important decisions at all scales, from personal matters to international agreements, would be informed by experience and reason, along with the perspective that old age brings. And it might even mean a more compassionate world. Among the chemical changes we see in the aging brain are a tendency toward understanding, forgiveness, tolerance, and acceptance. While older adults may become more set in their ways, and there is a tendency toward conservatism, they can at the same time become more accepting of individual differences and appreciative of the struggles that others have had to face. Older adults can bring a much-needed compassion to a world being rent by impatience, intolerance, and lack of empathy.



We have a silo problem in my field of cognitive neuroscience. There's a tendency for researchers to talk to people in their own area, and not to talk across areas. In the last thirty years we've seen big, transformative advances in the understanding of many core ideas about personality, emotions, and brain development. But few people in one area talk to people in another, and so we're left with a situation where neither medical professionals nor the public are able to leverage these advances for our individual and common good.

I was extraordinarily fortunate when I started out, to have mentors who were working in diverse areas, and all of them are still active—personality psychologists (like Lew Goldberg and Sarah Hampson, now eighty-seven and sixty-eight, respectively), cognitive psychologists (Michael Posner and Roger Shepard, now eighty-three and ninety, respectively), and developmental neuroscientists (Ursula Bellugi, now eighty-eight, and Susan Carey, now seventy-seven). This led me to bridge two areas that have maintained separate intellectual traditions—developmental neuroscience and individual differences (personality) psychology. The more I study the intersection of these two, the more intrigued I am at how they can help us to understand the aging brain and the choices all of us can make to maximize our chances of living long, happy, and productive lives. The intersection of these two scientific fields, and how they apply to aging, is the core theme that runs throughout *The Changing Mind*, and something that no one else has written about for a popular audience.

The developmental neuroscience view I will present here is that it is the interactions among genes, culture, and opportunity that are the biggest determinants of

- the trajectory our lives take;
- how our brains will change; and
- whether or not we'll be healthy, engaged, and happy throughout our life span.

No matter what age we are, our brains are always changing in response to pressures from genes, culture, and opportunity. The choices we make dictate much of the lives we lead. But we are also affected by random things that happen to us, and the choices that others make. Opportunity, or lack thereof, is often a matter of luck, governed by large historical forces, such as wealth, plagues, access to clean water, education, and good laws. In ways both large and small your brain has been changed by your life's experiences, whatever they are—by disappointment, love, interactions with key people, successes, illnesses, accidental injuries, pain, environmental toxins. In short, your brain is continually being changed by life itself.

I add to this perspective the rich body of work on individual differences. The story of traits—the ways in which we understand our individual differences—is one of the most fascinating stories in modern science. It traces its roots back to Aristotle, who explained differences in personalities among individuals as differences in their “matter.” The eighteenth-century scientist Franz Joseph Gall and the nineteenth-century scientist Sir Francis Galton launched the modern study of individual differences, with Gall even anticipating the modern neuroscientific idea that specific mental functions can be localized to different parts of the brain. (Gall invented phrenology, the study of bumps on the head; this has now been shown to be ridiculous, but his primary hypothesis of localization of brain function still stands today.) Gordon Allport, Hans Eysenck, Amos Tversky, and Lew Goldberg, among many talented others, established individual differences as a science and a rigorous field.

Individual differences psychology seeks to both characterize and quantify the thousands of ways that we humans differ from one another. It uses relatively sophisticated mathematical-statistical tools, such as principal components analysis, and seeks to understand not just the ways we differ from one another, but also the roots of these differences. The goal of this work has always been to predict others' future behaviors—if I know that you're conscientious, for example, will I have a better chance of knowing how you'll react to a certain situation than if I didn't know that about you?



So what can we do to maintain strength of body, mind, and spirit while coming to terms with the limitations that aging can bring? What can we learn from those who age joyously, remaining vital and engaged well into their eighties, nineties, and even beyond? How do we adapt our culture to service the needs of aging generations while also taking greater advantage of their wisdom, experience, and motivation to contribute to society?

Throughout this book, I'll be reinforcing the lifestyle concept that we *can* change our personalities and our responses to the environment, while continually adapting to the random and unpredictable things life throws at us. This concept has five parts: Curiosity, Openness, Associations, Conscientiousness, and Healthy practices, what I call the COACH principle. This is not another book telling you to do sudoku. *The Changing Mind* will explain what is going on in our brains as we age, and what we can do about it, based on a rigorous analysis of neuroscientific evidence.

The Changing Mind has three aims: first, to harness our knowledge so that we can anticipate changes—both positive and negative—and put systems in place that will ease our transitions and minimize the possibility of unwanted outcomes. These can be as simple as establishing a good relationship with your doctor, taking supplements to improve myelination of the nervous system, and hiding a key in a lockbox in case you forget yours in the house (as I once did in subzero temperatures—*before* I had a lockbox). There are definite things we can do to dampen the ill effects of memory loss, perceptual loss, and the shrinking social circles that often accompany aging. We can fight to reverse the tendency to narrow our interests, to become set in our ways, and to fear even moderate risk taking. We can learn to exploit the wisdom and skills that we have attained, becoming much-sought-after friends, rather than forgotten old people.

Second, this book aims to stimulate all of us to think about what ingredients presage a feeling of life well-lived when we look back from the end of life. What decisions can we make, both ahead of time and in the present moment, that will maximize our life satisfaction and infuse our lives with meaning? In previous books, I've been vocal about the overuse of social media, including Facebook. Don't get me wrong—I use them, and I think that they are a fantastic way of staying in touch with our friends and family who are scattered across great distances. But when you're at the end of your life, lying on your deathbed, the research literature strongly predicts you won't be saying, "I wish I had spent more time on Facebook." Instead, you'll probably be saying, "I wish I had spent more time with loved ones," or, "I wish I had done more to make a difference in the world."

Ultimately, this book aims to help us think completely differently about aging, as individuals, as community members, as a society; it aspires to advance the evolution of a culture that embraces the gifts of the elderly, weaving cross-generational interactions into the fabric of everyday experience. By looking at the science of the brain—specifically the insights from developmental neuroscience and individual differences psychology—this book seeks to induce a transformative understanding of the aging process, the final chapter of our human story.

When older people look back on their lives and are asked to pinpoint the age at which they were happiest, what do you suppose they say? Maybe age eight, when they had few cares? Maybe their teenage years because of all the activity and the discovery of sex? Maybe their college years, or the first years of starting a family? Wrong. The age that comes up most often as the happiest time of one's life is eighty-two!⁹ The goal of this book is to help raise that number by ten or twenty years. Science says it can be done. And I'm with science.



Part One

THE CONTINUALLY DEVELOPING BRAIN

What are the determinants in how we age? The different systems in our brains age at different rates. Some systems decline as others actually increase in efficiency and effectiveness. The basic message we hear in popular culture, that aging is a time of unmitigated decline, is not accurate. Yes, some things do slow down, but our health, happiness, and mental sparkle need not. The latest neuroscientific research suggests an entirely new way of thinking about aging—about memory, our perceptual systems, intelligence, even about motivation, pain, and our social lives. You might think, as I used to, that the story of why some of us age better than others has to do with all of these cognitive and emotional factors. In fact, the biggest single determinant of living a productive and happy life is something that you're born with (partly) and something that you can decide to change: your personality.

Individual Differences and Personality

The search for the magic number

I visited a day care center for preschoolers recently and was struck by how early the differences in children's traits and individual dispositions show up. Some children are more outgoing, while others are shy; some like to explore the environment and take risks, while others are more fearful; some get along well with others and some are bullies—even by age four. Young parents who have more than one child see immediate differences in the dispositions of siblings, as well as differences between their offspring and themselves.

At the other end of life, there are clear differences in how people age—some people simply seem to fare better than others. Even setting aside differences in physical health, and the various diseases that might overcome us late in life, some older adults live more dynamic, engaged, active, and fulfilling lives than others. Can you look at a five-year-old and tell whether they will be a successful eighty-five-year-old? Yes, you can.

The discovery that aging and health are related to personality was the result of a lot of work. First, scientists had to figure out how to measure and define personality. What is it? How do you observe it accurately and quantitatively? Here, they may have taken inspiration from Galileo, who said, “The job of the scientist is to measure what is measurable and to render measurable that which is not.” And so they did.

Among the most solid findings is that a child's personality affects adult health outcomes later in life. Take, for example, a child who was always getting into trouble in elementary school and continued to do so as a preteen. As a teenager, they might have smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol, and used marijuana. In personality terms, we might say that this teenager was sensation- and adventure-seeking, high on the quality of extraversion, low on conscientiousness and emotional stability. The kid would have been at increased risk for hard drug use, or being killed in a motor vehicle accident while driving drunk. If they survived these increased risks in young adulthood but didn't change their habits, they'd enter middle age with a highly inflated risk of lung cancer from smoking or liver damage from drinking.¹ Even more subtle behaviors can influence outcomes many decades later: Early and compulsive exposure to the sun and sun tanning; poor dental hygiene; poor exercise habits; and obesity all take their toll.

One of the pioneers in the relationship between personality and aging is Sarah Hampson, a research scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. As Hampson notes, “Lack of self-control may result in behaviors that increase the probability of exposure to dangerous or traumatic situations and adversely affect health through long-lasting biological consequences of stress.”² She has found that childhood is a critical period for laying down patterns of behavior with biological effects that endure into adulthood. If you want to live a long and healthy life, it helps to have had the right

upbringing. Childhood personality traits, assessed in elementary school, predict a person's lipid levels, blood glucose, and waist size forty years later.³ These three markers, in turn, predict risk for cardiovascular disease and diabetes. The same childhood traits even predict life span.⁴

Although these correlations between early childhood and late adulthood personality are robust, they tell only a part of the story. People age differently, and part of that story has to do with the interaction of genetics, environment, and opportunity (or luck). Scientists developed a mathematical way of tracking personality, comparing traits as they differ across individuals or change within a person over time. With it, we can talk about age-related, culture-related, and medically induced changes in personality, such as occur with Alzheimer's disease. Often one of the first indications of a problem with your brain is a change in personality.

And in the past few years, developmental science has shown that people, even older adults, can meaningfully change—we do not have to live out a life that was paved for us by genetics, environment, and opportunity.⁵ The great psychologist William James wrote that personality was “set in plaster” by early adulthood, but fortunately he was wrong.

The idea that people retain the capacity to change throughout their life span didn't take hold until the midseventies, when an idea first put forward by psychologist Nancy Bayley was popularized by the German developmental psychologist Paul Baltes.⁶

Most developmental researchers do accept the notion that developmental change is not restricted to any specific stage of the life-span and that, depending upon the function and the environmental context, behavior change can be pervasive and rapid at all ages.⁷ In fact ... the rate of change is greatest in infancy and old age.

Not everyone takes advantage of this capacity, but it is there, like the ability to adjust your diet or your wardrobe. The events of your childhood can be overcome and transformed based on experiences you have later in life. Bayley and Baltes' big idea was that no single period of life holds supremacy over another.

Of course, the idea that people can change is the entire basis of modern psychotherapy.⁸ People seek psychiatrists and psychologists because they want to change, and modern psychiatry and psychology are largely effective in treating or curing a great number of mental disorders and stressors, especially phobias, anxiety, stress disorders, relationship problems, and mild to moderate depression. Some of these volitional changes revolve around improved lifestyle choices, while others entail changing our personalities, sometimes only slightly, to give us the best chance of aging well. To implement the changes that will be most effective, each of us might think about the fundamental components of how we are now, how we used to be, and how we'd like to be.

The collection of dispositions and traits that we have in any given period comprise our personalities. All cultures tend to describe people using trait-based labels, such as *generous*, *interesting*, and *reliable* (on the positive side) or *stingy*, *boring*, and *erratic* (on the negative side), along with more or less neutral or context-dependent terms such as *boyish* and *breezy*. This “trait” approach, however, can obscure two important facts: (1) we often display different traits as situations change, and (2) we can change our traits.

Few people are generous, interesting, or reliable all the time—opportunity and the fluidly evolving situations in which we find ourselves can exert a strong pull on what may be genetic predispositions toward certain behaviors and certain habitual ways of

presenting ourselves to the world. Traits are probabilistic descriptions of behavior. Someone who is described as high on one trait (having a lot of it) will display that trait more often and more intensely than someone low on that trait.⁹ Someone who is agreeable has a greater probability of displaying agreeableness than someone who is disagreeable, but disagreeable people are still agreeable some of the time, just as introverts are extraverted some of the time.

Culture plays a role as well, both macro- and microculture. What is considered shy, reserved behavior in the United States (macrolevel culture) might be regarded as perfectly normal in Japan. And staying within the United States for the moment (microlevel culture), behavior that is considered acceptable in a hockey game might not be acceptable in the boardroom.

Booker T. Washington wrote that “character, not circumstance,” makes the person. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “No change of circumstances can repair a defect of character.” While character makes for a good story or poem, in reality we are less shaped by character traits than we think, and more than we realize by the circumstances that life deals us—and our responses to those circumstances. It would be nice to be able to grade these circumstances from severely deleterious to benign, but what makes that impossible to do is individual differences in the way we respond to things. Some children who were (or felt) abandoned by their parents grow up to be well-adjusted, do-gooding members of society; others become axe murderers. Resilience, grit, and gratitude for the small things in life (“at least I still have food to eat”) are personality traits that are unevenly distributed in the population.

We think of our genes as influencing physical traits, like hair color, skin color, and height. But genes also influence mental and personality traits, such as self-assuredness, a tendency toward compassion, and how emotionally variable we are. Look at a room full of one-year-olds and it is apparent that some are more calm than others, some more independent, some loud, some quiet. Parents with more than one child marvel at how different their personalities were from the start. I carefully referred to genes *influencing* traits because the effect of genes is not chiseled in stone. Your genes don't *dictate* how you'll be, but they do provide a set of constraints, limits on how your personality will be shaped. Genetics is not an edict—the traits that our genes contribute to still need to navigate the twisty and unpredictable roads of culture and opportunity. Complex traits are best described as emergent properties that you cannot read in any one gene, nor even in a large set of genes, because how the genes express themselves over time is critical to the development of the trait as a social reality.

Genes can be present in your body but in a dormant state, waiting for the right environmental trigger to activate them—what is called gene expression. A traumatic experience, a good or bad diet, how and when you sleep, or contact with an inspiring role model can cause chemical modifications to your genes that in turn cause them to wake up and become activated, or to go to sleep and turn off. The way the brain wires itself up, both in the womb and throughout the life span, is a complex tango between genetic possibilities and environmental factors. Neurons become connected whenever you learn something, but this is subject to genetic constraints. If you've inherited genes that contribute to making you five feet tall, no amount of learning is likely to get you into the NBA (although Spud Webb is five foot seven and Muggsy Bogues is five foot three). More subtly, if your genes constrain the auditory memory circuits in your brain—perhaps because they favor visual-spatial cognition—you're unlikely to become

a superstar musician no matter how many lessons you take, because musicianship relies on auditory memory.

One way to think about gene expression is to think of your life as a film or multiyear TV series.¹⁰ Think of your DNA as the script: the set of instructions, dialogue, and stage directions for all the participants in the film. Your cells are the actors. Gene expression is the way that the actors decide to express that script. The actors may bring a certain interpretation to those words, based on their experience, and might surprise even the writers.

And, of course, the actors interact with and play off one another, for better or for worse. Jason Alexander, the actor who played George Costanza on *Seinfeld*, complained about how difficult it was to work with Heidi Swedberg (who played George's fiancée, Susan).¹¹ "I couldn't figure out how to play off of her Her instincts for doing a scene, where the comedy was, and mine were always misfiring." Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Jerry Seinfeld had similar complaints and reportedly said that doing scenes with her was "impossible." But the chemistry between Alexander, Louis-Dreyfus, Seinfeld, and Michael Richards (Cosmo Kramer) was palpable, making *Seinfeld* the most successful comedy series in history.

Your genes, then, give you a kind of life script with only the most general things sketched out. And from there, you can improvise. Culture affects the ways you interpret that script, as do opportunity and circumstance. And then, once you interpret the script, it influences the way others respond to you. Those responses in your social world can change your brain's wiring and chemistry, in turn affecting how you'll respond to future events and which genes turn on and off—over and over again, cascading in complexity.

The second feature in the triad, *culture*, plays an important role in our understanding of traits. Humility is more valued in Mexico than in the United States, and more valued in rural Wisconsin than on Wall Street. Polite in Tel Aviv might be thought of as rude in Ottawa. The terms we use to describe others are not absolutes; they are culturally relative—when we describe differences in personality traits, we're necessarily talking about how an individual compares to their society and to their societal norms.

Family is a microculture, and traditions, outlook, political and social views differ widely, especially within large industrialized countries. Go door to door in any town or city and you'll find a wide range of attitudes about things as mundane as whether friends can just drop by or need to schedule in advance; how often teeth should be flossed (if at all); or whether TV and device time are regulated. And these unique family cultural values map onto particular personality traits: spontaneity, conscientiousness, and willingness (or at least ability) to follow rules. Culture is a potent factor in who we become.

The third part of the developmental triad is *opportunity*. Opportunity and circumstance play a larger part in behavior than most of us appreciate, and they do this in two different ways: how the world treats us, and the situations we find (or put) ourselves in.

Fair-skinned children burn more quickly in the sun than dark-skinned children and so may spend less time outdoors; skinny children can explore the insides of drainage pipes and the tops of trees more easily than heavy children. You may start out with an adventure-seeking personality, but if your body won't let you realize it, you may seek other experiences, or adventure in less physical ways (like video games—or math).

Apart from these physical features, we all play roles, in our families and in society. The eldest child in a multichild household tends to take on some of the parenting and instruction of the younger ones; the youngest child may be relatively coddled or ignored, depending on the parents; the middle child may find herself thrust into the role of peacemaker. These factors influence our development, but again, as with genes, they are not deterministic—we can break free of them to improvise, to create our own futures, but it takes some effort (and for some, a lot of false starts, failures, and therapy).

How the World Treats Us

You might assume that identical twins end up with similar personalities just because they share identical (or near-identical) genes. But it might also be due to the fact that, to some extent, the world treats people who look alike in similar ways. People generally react with certain biases to the way you look, and by the time you were twelve or so, you probably recognized a pattern in how others reacted to you. Skin color, weight, and attractiveness are key determinants of how people are treated by teachers, strangers, and, unfortunately, the police.¹² In one study of St. Petersburg, Florida, police department operations, male, nonwhite, poor, and younger suspects were all treated with more physical force, irrespective of their behavior.¹³

Suppose there is something about your face and physique that makes you look mean—a certain way that your eyebrows curl downward toward your eyes, a squinty look to your eyelids, deep creases around your mouth—what is colloquially known as “resting bitch face.” According to *The Washington Post*, actress Kristen Stewart is the poster child for it, and Anna Kendrick is a self-described sufferer.¹⁴ (It applies to males as well, including Kanye West.) You may find that people are wary around you and even fear you. You may be kind and gentle on the inside, but after a lifetime of being misjudged, of people treating you suspiciously, you could turn cold in your social interactions, a real-life Shrek—the ogre who looks mean and frightens people but has a heart of gold.

One way this has been studied experimentally is to look at inter-rater agreement. Participants in an experiment meet strangers, or view photographs or videos of strangers, and then have to describe those strangers using a range of personality terms. The assumption is that, if you don’t know someone, your judgments of them will be based on their physical appearance—the particulars of their face, body type, dress, and body language. Studies like these go back to the early work in the sixties of Lew Goldberg at the University of Oregon and the Oregon Research Institute. These studies found consistent agreement across a variety of personality traits, such as *sociable*, *extraverted*, *good-natured*, *responsible*, *calm*, *conscientious*, and *intellectual* just based on what someone looked like. There is far less consistency in judgments for other terms such as *agreeable*, *neurotic*, and *emotionally stable*.

Of course, a bunch of strangers agreeing that someone is *responsible* doesn’t make them so. All that these experiments show is that when we interact with strangers, we bring some social-psychological baggage. The consensus about that baggage suggests that people within a culture share beliefs about how personality traits are linked to physical characteristics. When participants’ ratings of themselves were compared to the strangers’ ratings, some terms show high agreement, especially *sociable* and *responsible*. And although our self-perceptions are often flat-out wrong or distorted by ego needs, sometimes they are accurate—the problem is, we don’t know which times.

The culture we live in has a great deal of influence on how we categorize and evaluate traits. A body type that one culture finds threatening another might find

their languages for these important personality descriptors. Furthermore, there is very little that is distinctive culturally in these societies' attitudes and actions toward the mentally ill.¹⁷ Even words for more common and minor forms of mental illness, such as anxiety and depression, are found throughout the world.

Once scientists figured out *how* to measure personality, and how to describe people, another problem arose. There are thousands and thousands of different words used to describe personality traits—in English, there are 4,500 of them in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, and more than 450 in current and common use.¹⁸ The sheer number can make a science of trait descriptions unwieldy—difficult to summarize, talk about, or make predictions with. This was one of the first “big data” problems, decades before there was Facebook or climate change data to analyze.

What scientists typically do with such mounds of data is to use mathematical techniques for data reduction, merging similar items into the same category or dimension. Doing so can allow us to discuss the data using a shorthand. We don't discard the original data, so we can always go back to it.

Consider by analogy the shorthand we use to talk about spatial location—where people and things are in the world. We could use a three-dimensional coordinate system, such as latitude, longitude, and height above sea level, and for some things we do. But it is a cumbersome system that provides more information than we usually need. Instead, we divide the world into continents, countries, cities, neighborhoods, and so on, and this is usually enough.

Suppose you're trying to schedule a meeting with people in your Houston-based organization and you haven't been able to reach Terry. Briana says, “Oh, Terry is in Europe for the next couple of weeks.” That's really all you need to know—you don't need to know if he's in Portugal or Macedonia, or if he's staying on rue des Capuchins in Lyon, but presumably you could find out his exact location if you wanted to FedEx him some meeting notes—or maybe you only need his email address. And just because we've described Terry's location simply as *Europe* doesn't mean we'll confuse Terry's location with that of other people or things in Europe. If Doug says, “Oh—my cousin's suitcase was just sent to Europe by mistake; maybe Terry will run into it there,” we see the folly: Europe is big. And so it goes with personality descriptions.

Even if we could find a way to summarize personality descriptions, to give us a shorthand for talking about them, it wouldn't mean that everyone who is included in a personality description category is alike. But there may exist broad and meaningful trends we can talk about that, in general, distinguish a North American temperament or outlook from, say, an Asian or African one, without losing sight of individual differences and variability. And personality traits fall along a continuum: We can use modifiers to say that a person is more or less charming, more or less grouchy, more or less European.

Dozens of researchers spanning several countries set about trying to understand the best way to organize personality terms, to create a useful taxonomy. Ideally, whatever system we come up with would work across languages and cultures, which would greatly facilitate comparisons. It took more than fifty years for scientists to come to a consensus about this.

One prominent scientist argued for twenty to thirty dimensions; several others for two.^{19, 20} Some argued for five or thirteen. Our friend Lew Goldberg initially gravitated toward a three-factor (three-dimensional) model proposed by psychologist Dean Peabody, rejecting the five-factor model, now known as the Big Five. “To my scientific tastes,” Lew said, “the Peabody model was elegant and beautiful, whereas the

five-factor structure was a nightmare: All of the Big-Five factors but the first, extraversion, were highly related to evaluation [good-bad], meaning that they weren't truly independent dimensions." From roughly 1975 to 1985, he worked on collecting and analyzing data from a variety of sources to support the Peabody three-factor model, but no matter what he did, a five-factor model emerged from the analyses. Lew appealed to Dean Peabody to set up an experiment that would help them choose between three and five dimensions, something they designed together. When the data came in, they published a paper together showing that five dimensions comprised a more useful system (and it incorporated the original Peabody three). Goldberg became a reluctant convert, as did Peabody himself.

This never would have happened if Goldberg and Peabody had not been *collaborative, open to new experience, agreeable*, and at least slightly *extraverted*.

Collaborating with someone you disagree with represents a scientific ideal. When two or more researchers who are pursuing different theories, and who disagree with one another, decide to work together, the results can transform a field. Today many consider Lew the father of the Big Five personality categories. There have been cross-cultural replications in dozens of languages and cultures, including Chinese, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Turkish. As you might expect, some minor differences emerge in disparate cultures, but the Big Five remain the best description.

The Big Five dimensions are:

- I. Extraversion
- II. Agreeableness
- III. Conscientiousness
- IV. Emotional Stability versus Neuroticism
- V. Openness to Experience + Intellect (also called Imagination)

Each of these categories includes many dozens of individual traits.²¹ As you can see, there has been some controversy around what to call the last one, but don't let that bother you—it is a well-defined dimension that includes a number of traits that cohere in real life.

EXTRAVERSION includes *talkative, bold, energetic*, and their opposites, *quiet, timid, and lethargic*.²² People who score high on the Extraversion dimension tend to be comfortable around other people, start conversations, and don't mind being the center of attention.²³

AGREEABLENESS includes *warm, cooperative, generous*, and the opposites *cold, adversarial, and stingy*. People who score high on this dimension tend to be interested in other people, sympathize with others' feelings, and make people feel at ease.

CONSCIENTIOUSNESS includes *organized, responsible, careful, and practical*, and the opposites *disorganized, irresponsible, sloppy, and impractical*. People who score high on this dimension tend to be prepared, be diligent, pay attention to details, and do what they say they will do.

EMOTIONAL STABILITY includes *stable, contented, and at ease*, and *unstable, discontented, and nervous*. People who score high on this dimension are not easily bothered by things, are relaxed, and don't change their moods a lot.

OPENNESS (also called INTELLECT and IMAGINATION) includes *curious, intelligent, and creative*, as well as *uninquisitive, dumb, and uncreative*. It includes cognitive and behavioral flexibility. People who score high on this dimension are quick to understand things, have a vivid imagination, and like trying new things, new restaurants, and going to new places.²⁴ It is separate from intellectual ability but speaks to a propensity to enjoy intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, and artistic experiences.

If you want to sound like a personality researcher, you can use the shorthand of the factor numbers, such as, “Oh, that Nancy is very low on Factor II,” or, “I think you should promote Stan in accounting—he’s high on Factors II and III.”²⁵

The drive to organize people’s traits into categories is ancient; astrology is one such attempt to assign personalities to people systematically, depending on when they were born. While it is still popular throughout the world, it has no scientific basis. Sure, you may know a Capricorn who is stubborn, but statistically, you’re just as likely to find stubborn Leos, Libras, and Sagittarians.

One point that often gets confused is that people tend to think of the Big Five as a typology (the extraverted type, the neurotic type, etc.). That’s not the case—it’s the configuration (or profile) of the five factors that represents someone’s personality. Just as we can describe physical objects in terms of length, width, and height, the Big Five framework allows us to describe human personality in terms of the five factors. Proponents of the Big Five never intended to reduce the rich tapestry of personality to a mere five traits. Rather, they seek to provide a framework in which to organize the myriad individual differences that characterize human beings. This organization reveals a great deal about things that have historically been important for humans to know about one another.

Factor I. Is Jason *active and dominant* or *passive and submissive*? (Can I bully Jason or will Jason try to bully me?)

Factor II. Is Mari *agreeable* or *disagreeable*? (Will my interactions with Mari be warm and pleasant or cold and distant?)

Factor III. Is Letitia *responsible and conscientious* or *negligent and erratic*? (Can I count on Letitia?)

Factor IV. Is Hannah *crazy* or *sane*? (Can I predict what Hannah will do, and will her actions make sense to me?)

Factor V. Is Felix *smart* or *dumb*? (How easy will it be for me to teach Felix? Is there anything I can learn from him?)

So What?

What does all this mean for us, people who are interested in the science of aging? The Big Five gives us a universally recognized structure for organizing what would otherwise be an unwieldy number of traits.

Whenever genes, situations, or therapy changes our personalities, they must do so by changing the brain. In that sense, all personality differences are biological, regardless of whether they are influenced by genetics or not, because they must go

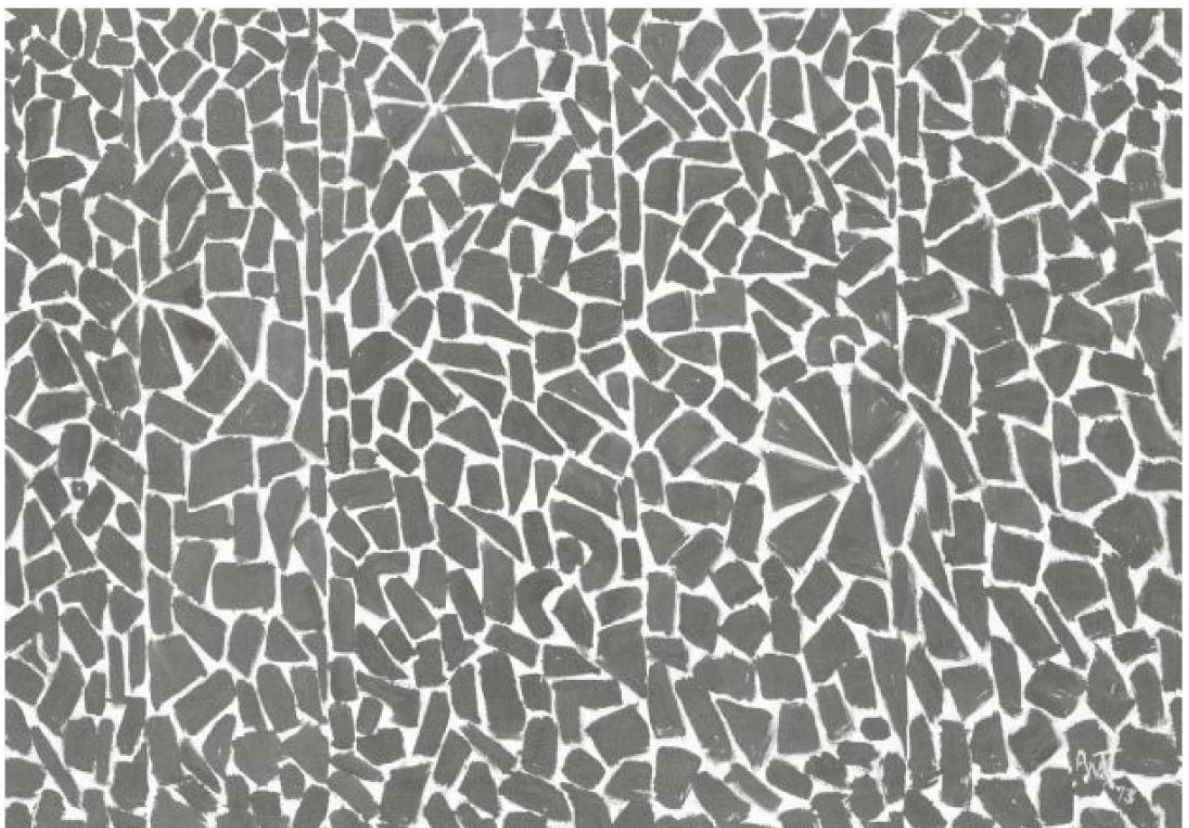
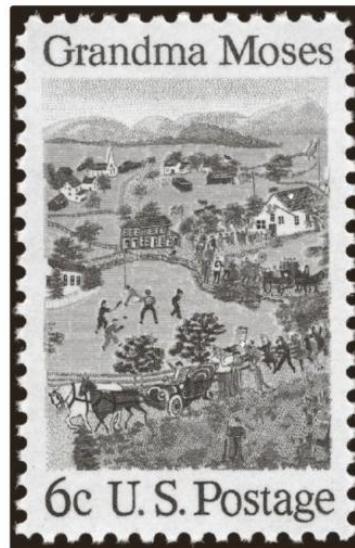
Role models show us we can step outside of who we are. We look at them and see the kinds of changes we want to make, the kinds of lives we want to lead—we see that what might have remained a dusty and dark secret aspiration is *possible*. They help us realize that we can become our own autobiographers—we can alter the story of our lives for better or worse.⁴⁶ But one person’s inspiring role model might just be annoying to another person. That’s the reason that so many different voices grace this book. You may not agree with everyone’s politics or outlook on life, but these individuals are included to show the wide range of possibilities for staying healthy, engaged, and active in one’s later years, for—as Jane Fonda described it to me—aging *gracefully*.

Creating your own future is possible at any age. Julia “Hurricane” Hawkins is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and a retired schoolteacher.⁴⁷ She is a devoted gardener with an affection for bonsai trees. Hawkins took up competitive athletics for the first time at age seventy-five. She competed as a cyclist in the National Senior Games, winning bronze and gold medals. Twenty-five years later, she branched out, taking up running at age one hundred. Hawkins again competed in the National Senior Games at age 101, establishing the record for women one hundred and older in the hundred-yard dash at 39.62 seconds. She also competed in the fifty-yard dash against other runners as “young” as ninety, finishing in 18.31 seconds. Her secret? “Keep in good shape, try not to be overweight, get good sleep, and keep exercising and training.”⁴⁸ However, she adds, “There is a fine line of pushing yourself and wearing yourself out. You don’t want to overdo it. You just want to do the best you can do.” In 2017, after winning the hundred-yard dash in the National Senior Games, she said, “I don’t feel 101. I feel about 60 or 70. You are not going to be perfect at 101, but nothing stops me.” A year later, at age 102, Hawkins set a new world record for running sixty meters in 24.79 seconds. “I just like the feeling of being independent and doing something a little different and testing myself, trying to get better.” In June 2019, at age 103, she won gold medals in the 50 and 100 meter races.

Testing oneself and trying to get better are themes that run through the inspirational lives of so many. At age ninety-three, the guitarist Andrés Segovia launched a new tour, and in one of his last interviews before his death at ninety-four he said that he still practiced five hours a day. Why, having accomplished so much in his life and being regarded as the greatest living guitarist, was he still practicing? “There’s this one passage that has been giving me a little bit of trouble,” he said.

The Netflix series *Grace and Frankie*, in its fifth season airing in 2019, stars Jane Fonda, eighty-two, and Lily Tomlin, eighty. Tomlin’s character, Frankie Bergstein, is a textbook case of someone with great openness—she smokes marijuana regularly, is a painter, and once hired a building contractor who lived in the woods behind a neighbor’s house. Fonda’s character, Grace Hanson, is set in her ways, emotionally cold, and conservative. In the second season, they start their own business, something that is completely new for the hippie-socialist Frankie, and in season four Grace starts dating a younger man, played by Peter Gallagher. What draws so many people to the show is the message that you can change in later life, you can try new things, and you can have fun doing it. “What Lily and I hear very often,” Fonda says, “is ‘It makes us feel less afraid of getting older.’⁴⁹ It makes us feel hopeful.’ ... I left the [entertainment] business at age 50, and I came back at age 65. It’s been an unusual situation to re-create a career at that age One of the things that Lily and I are proud of—and want to continue with—is showing that you may be old, you may be in your third act, but you can still be vital and sexual and funny ... that life isn’t over.”

Anna Mary Robertson, better known as Grandma Moses, didn't even start painting seriously until she was seventy-five, and continued until she was 101. Today her works are displayed at the Smithsonian and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others, and have sold for more than a million dollars. One of her paintings hangs in the White House and was turned into a commemorative stamp. She painted it at age ninety-one. Alma Thomas didn't have her first art exhibition until she was seventy-five. She was the first African American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney, and now her works hang in the Smithsonian and the White House.



I'm reminded of another story, of a man who was born poor in Indiana in 1890 and whose father died when he was five.⁵⁰ An unmotivated child, he dropped out of school in the middle of seventh grade and never went back. By age seventeen, he had already

been fired from four jobs. He became a drifter, moving from one unskilled job to another, finding himself broke most of his life. If early childhood and young adult experiences were all there was to a life story, you could predict that his life would be characterized by one disappointment after another. Indeed, he appeared aimless and unfocused. Among other things, he found work as a steam engine stoker, farmhand, blacksmith, soldier, railroad fireman, buggy painter, streetcar conductor, janitor, insurance salesman, and filling station operator, but never managed to hold on to a job or to save any money. At age fifty, he started another doomed job, a roadside eatery in Corbin, Kentucky. The restaurant eked along and then finally gave its last gasp, going out of business when he was sixty-two. There he was, pushing retirement age, broke (again), and living out of his car. How many of us would give up at that point? He had never had a success in his life, and the life expectancy for a sixty-two-year-old in 1952 was just another 3.2 years.

One day he took an old family recipe and, imagining the potential of franchised restaurants, opened one in Utah with borrowed money. That might be the end of the story, except that his name was Harland Sanders, and the restaurant was Kentucky Fried Chicken, now known as KFC and one of the largest suppliers of food in the world. Sanders sold the company at age seventy-four for \$2 million, about the equivalent of \$32 million in today's dollars. The company he conceived of at age sixty-two now has annual revenues of \$23 billion and is known throughout the world. He continued advising the company and working as a brand ambassador into his nineties.

At age eighty-nine, Colonel Sanders was asked, "You don't believe in retirement?"⁵¹ "No," he answered adamantly. "Not a bit in the world. When the Lord put Father Adam here he never told him to quit at 65, did he? He worked into his final years. I think as long as you've got health, and ability, use it ... to the end."

Trying something new later in life, like competitive sports, business enterprises, or artistic endeavors, can dramatically increase both your quality of life and how long you live. Openness and curiosity correlate highly with good health and long life. People who are curious are more apt to challenge themselves intellectually and socially and reap the rewards of the mental calisthenics that result. They are also more likely to be interested and engaged, which makes them more fun to be around, and interacting with others socially is a good way to stay mentally agile and alert.

Conscientiousness

Perhaps the most important traits to foster and develop throughout the life span are those in Factor III, Conscientiousness. Conscientious people are more likely to have a doctor and to go see one when they're sick. They're more likely to get regular medical checkups and to reliably keep up with their professional, family, and financial commitments. This may sound like a mostly practical matter, but Factor III traits are highly correlated with a panoply of positive life outcomes, including longevity, success, and happiness. Conscientiousness has been linked to lower all-cause mortality.⁵² Conversely, lower childhood conscientiousness predicts greater obesity, physiological dysregulation, and worse lipid profiles in adulthood. To become more conscientious, one must change underlying cognitive processes such as self-regulation (controlling impulsive behaviors) and self-monitoring (noticing which circumstances lead to successful self-regulation and which circumstances sabotage self-regulation).⁵³ If you wish you had more of these, a number of different methods have been shown to work for adults of any age, from cognitive behavioral therapy to David Allen's book *Getting Things Done*.

Compassion

There is an inherent asymmetry in the amount and kind of information we have about ourselves versus what we know about others. You have unique access to your past actions and to your current mental states and motivations, but you do not have this level of access to others' memories and states of mind (except in a good movie or novel). They have the same lack of access when judging you. Imagine you're driving a fancy car and a homeless person walks up and asks for a dollar as you're waiting at a stoplight. Imagine also that you don't give it to him. He may conclude that you're a tightwad. You may have wanted to help but not have had any cash on you. One behavior, two different interpretations.

One tangible thing that we can all do to avoid misjudging others is to exercise compassion, to allow for the possibility that you might be wrong in attributing a trait to someone's behavior. Indeed, this is *the* core principle at the heart of both social psychology and the teachings of the Dalai Lama. "Compassion is the key to happiness," he says.⁵⁷ "We are a social species and our happiness is defined by our relationship with others." The Dalai Lama believes this comes from the biology of our species, of the importance of social interactions to all primates. He tries to avoid feeling anger, suspicion, and distrust and instead practices patience, tolerance, and compassion.⁵⁸ In addition, he avoids thinking of himself as privileged or special, and this increases his happiness a great deal.⁵⁹

I never considered myself as something special. If I consider myself to [be] something different from you, like, 'I am Buddhist' or even more [with haughty voice] 'I am His Holiness the Dalai Lama' or even if I consider that 'I am a Nobel laureate,' then actually you create yourself as a prisoner. I forget these things—I simply consider I am one of seven billion human beings.

Buddhism, like most of the world's religions, teaches you how to change your personality. You may feel that your personality is fixed, inflexible, and was determined in childhood, but science has shown otherwise. In particular, studies since Bayley and Baltes have found that volitional (not disease-induced) personality change is possible at least through one's eighties, in the three continents so far studied, North America, Europe, and Asia.⁶⁰

The compassionate attitude and outlook are also related to experiencing less stress. You can choose not to be stressy—or learn how—and this can save your life. The HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis is an endocrine system that controls the secretion of stress hormones (glucocorticoids) including cortisol. Exposure to high levels of glucocorticoids can be particularly detrimental for the aging hippocampus and is associated with decrements in learning and memory.⁶¹ Among the things that psychotherapy is best at, stress reduction is one of the most important things you can do for your overall health. And yet, there can be too much of a good thing. Too much stress reduction, like too much optimism, may cause you to ignore important health issues or to become unmotivated to work or seek social contact. Moderate amounts of stress impel us to do things—to exercise, eat well, and nurture our mental health by making friends and spending time with them.

Is a Good Personality Sufficient?

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