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One of the joys of older age can be grandchildren. I laughed when I heard one little boy ask another “How old is your Grandad?” He replied “I don’t know – but we’ve had him for a long time”. So as a Grandmother I want to speak on behalf of those of us who weren’t born yesterday to say “thank you” to those involved in the recent research programme which concentrated on the needs of older people.

The New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Programme is the most ambitious programme of ageing research ever known in Europe. The man who directed The Programme was Professor Alan Walker, Professor of Social Policy and Social Gerontology at the University of Sheffield.

I congratulate him and The Programme on its vision in taking a Multidisciplinary approach, the research projects brought together researchers in different disciplines... to ensure that ageing questions were tackled across a broad front. Often single dimension research tends to study the problem from only one angle. This Programme also actively included older people at all stages as a fundamental principle.

Many of the NDA projects involved large numbers of older people as participants in the research, who became known as The Older People’s Reference Group. Research like this that addresses the real needs and views of older people is far more meaningful and powerful than research that makes assumptions about older people. None of us want to be taken for granted or have assumptions made about us, and there is no reason why research should be any

different to any other part of life in respecting this. So we owe those older people who took part in NDA a great debt of gratitude.

‘Stakeholder engagement’ in the research project was very important.

Organisations in a position to use the results of research to improve later life were involved in the Programme, so that hopefully the research would have the maximum potential utility.

Age UK was an active stakeholder and a Knowledge Transfer Partner in the Programme. Under the leadership of its Head of Research, Professor James Goodwin it was involved in eight of the NDA projects, contributing knowledge and expertise in a variety of ways. To gain maximum impact from the research it is hoped that people and organisations will use the new knowledge from the NDA research projects and apply it in their work... with and for older people. This should have a positive impact on improving older peoples’ lives.

Personally speaking I am aware of the needs of older people, being one of them myself. As the years go by we find ourselves worrying about money, our health, what is to happen to us if we fall, or become blind or are unable to cope independently any more. We are nervous about going into hospitals or into a Care home and we’re concerned about Dementia. We worry about the future of the World which to many of us, seems to be spinning out of control. We are fearful for our children and our grandchildren – and in no way do we want to become a burden to them.

From my time spent as a broadcaster, currently presenting the weekly 1 hour radio show “We’ve Got Mail” I regularly hear issues that concern older people and how they adversely affect lives. I hope many of you will have tuned into the new DAB station “The Wireless” from AgeUK.... radio for grownups! Each

week with a team of experts we help older people with information, support, and advice. We tackle concerns about pensions, benefits, health worries, care homes, support for loved ones, and even sexual relationships for older folk. And yes....despite what young people think, many of us still do it!

But, far too many older folk are lonely, living in isolation without adequate heat and with poor nutrition. Some fragile folk feel trapped in their homes too afraid to go out, whilst other vulnerable folk need care but are unable to access the help needed. Many need someone to guide them through the minefield of the benefit and care systems which could add quality to their lives. Some feel discriminated against and not able to stand up for themselves. For others language may be a problem in getting across their needs.

But getting older is not all doom and gloom. Growing older is not a disease...it happens to all of us. Ageing is a normal part of life.... and it's important to remind people that it's just common sense to look after their health. When the WHO (World Health Organisation) was established nearly half a century ago the text of its constitution defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well being..... And not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. With my background (particularly in the guise of The Green Goddess, fitness guru on Breakfast TV) I've come to realise the importance of looking after one's health in order to help maintain physical and mental independence. And yes.... we need to look after physical, mental and social fitness but we need to also be aware of spiritual, emotional, and environmental fitness too.

Of course ageing is inevitable – it's a depressing thought - nothing we can do about it. Or is there? No, we can't add years to life, but we can add life to those years we do have. Older people should be encouraged to help themselves to age gracefully, and to look after their health and wellbeing. I liken good

health to an insurance policy, the more you put in over the years the more you have in reserve to get you through difficult times. My own fitness certainly helped me get through my battle with Breast cancer 25 years ago.

Over my 40 plus years in the fitness industry I have observed that small changes to lifestyle, especially with regard to diet and exercise, can make a big difference, and reduce the chance of illness and disease. It's common sense really, it's your body and it's your life. But Wellbeing is not just about the Body, it's about the Mind and Spirit too, and being active can help reduce feelings of loneliness, anxiety, stress and worry. So I encourage my age group to get out there, to experience both the physical and social benefits from being active. For example we know walking is a life saver, helping us fight off heart disease, various cancers, strokes and type 2 diabetes. And I'm reminded of the Danish Christian philosopher and theologian Kierkegaard who said, and I quote....

“Above all do not lose your desire to walk;every day I walk myself into a state of wellbeing and walk away from every illness: I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it...thus if one just keeps on walking everything will be alright.”

OK maybe that's a bit optimistic! But I walk regularly along the river bank with my friends. We walk and we talk.....and we laugh. Social interaction, being active in a group can help lift the spirits, and the ability to talk through personal worries with others can often halve the problem, or put it into perspective. When we are active natural hormones, endorphins, are released which they give us that “feel good” factor helping to change our mood.

With the increase in longevity staying active and group participation is increasingly important. We all need social interaction and stimulation if we are to avoid the mental and emotional problems of lonely older folk.

Now...if you are lucky, as I am, a blessing of older age is grandchildren. I find the challenge of social interaction with the young people stimulating; it helps keep me both mentally and physically active. But many older people are not so lucky and find themselves living alone, sometimes through choice, but more often not by choice - following divorce or the death of their partner. This can lead to loneliness, isolation and depression.

Climbing out of the spiral of depression takes a lot of effort and self-motivation, and the problem is set to increase the longer we live. Social clubs, day centres, fitness classes, art and craft classes or joining organisations like the U3A are wonderful ways for singles to make friends, and to interact and integrate with others. I like to encourage people with skills to give back to the community by doing voluntary work and sharing their skills with youngsters. Both young and old can benefit greatly from the experience.

We can't turn back the clock, nor should we want to. The trick is to make the most of what we still have. But let's be realistic, it's very likely that one or two body parts are wearing out or may have been replaced, and for some people mobility isn't as good as it was. But that shouldn't mean giving up and giving in. With some amusement I think people of my age fall into 3 categories - those who still.....

- Make it happen
- Watch it happen
- Wonder.... what the heck happened!

But the Positive agers – like myself relish individualism are open-minded and eager to embrace all the opportunities that life still has to offer. And it does still have lots to offer. I think many of us mature folk can regard ourselves as “Chronologically advantaged!”

Age is just a number..... Age itself is irrelevant.

Age is mind over matter....and if you don't mind it doesn't matter!

And at this age we've come to accept ourselves – warts and all!

The image of Age has changed; we live in a stimulating, although uncertain time in history, but maintaining good health enables us to pursue some of our ambitions hopes and dreams. Nowadays many people continue to lead interesting lives well into their 80's and 90's. Compared to previous generations we have a better standard of living, people are living longer thanks to medical advances, and there is less threat of premature death, or serious disability, from insidious diseases such as smallpox, polio and some cancers.

Gone too are the social and economic restrictions of past generations.

Education, careers, opportunities and travel are available to most of us - irrespective of age, gender, colour, class or creed. Far from this being a time of life to switch off with thoughts of a quiet retirement, this is an age in which there is every opportunity to indulge oneself. Time to pursue a lifelong hobby, or importantly (I think) get conversant with computers, or even have the courage to start out on a second career, or a new relationship.

Older folk should aim to be independent and retain personal choices for as long as possible. Informed and able to make choices they have a powerful voice and their opinions can influence Government policies to improve the quality of life for the active ageing for many more years to come.

Nowadays recycling waste has become an important issue. But one thing you cannot recycle is wasted time! So this is the time to enjoy and celebrate older age. Happily many of retirement age are optimistic of the future, and with a combination of positive attitude and with researchers finding new ways to support good ageing and quality of life Britain can become better prepared for it's rapidly increase in the ageing population.

I think I'm typical of this new breed of older person, many of whom are fitter in their advanced years than some of the obese youngsters. Personally I've looked after health, and like many over 60's I've fought my battles. I'm aware of ageism and along with others hope to defeat it by being an example to youngsters in sport, entertainment and computer technology. Nowadays we older people have the choice to continue working, and many of us do because we need to/ or because we want to - and because we feel we've plenty more to give, not least of which is experience!

But I humorously admit that there may be some loss of efficiency in older age. I'm fortunate to work as a motivational speaker on many cruise ships and on a recent cruise I met 85 year old Gladys up in the Crows Nest Bar celebrating her birthday. She asked the Barman to give her "a Scotch – with 2 drops of water please dear". The young barman was puzzled and asked "Gladys why just 2 drops of water?" Smiling at the Barman Gladys replied... "Young man at my age you've learnt how to HOLD your liquor but - HOLDING YOUR WATER - that's another matter altogether!"

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