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# From 70 Years Old to 80 Years Young

*James P. Owen*



If someone had told me on my 70th birthday that one day I'd be giving people advice on the art of aging well, I'd have laughed out loud.

I was in terrible shape. My back was killing me, both knees were shot, and I was a good 20 to 25 pounds overweight. My right rotator cuff was "frozen." On top of that, I woke up every morning with little or no energy in the tank.

I looked in the mirror and thought, *So this is what old age looks like.*

Yet when I celebrated my 80th birthday, I was in the best shape of my life. I weighed less than I did in high school. I'd gone from being unable to do a single push-up to doing 50. And my doctor said my test numbers were like those of someone 20 years younger. Best of all, my back pain had disappeared.

Full disclosure: I'm not a doctor; nor do I have an advanced degree in kinesiology or gerontology. I'm just a guy who woke up one day and realized I had to start taking better care of myself, or there'd be a walker or wheelchair in my future.

What changed my life was one statistic. I read that if you make it to 70, the odds are, you'll live at least another 15 years. I couldn't help thinking, *If I look and feel this bad now, what will my life be like when I'm 85?*

Then and there, I set a long-term goal for myself—to be “80 years young,” no matter what it took.

I knew there was no quick fix or overnight makeover that could turn my life around. What I needed was a realistic, commonsense approach I could stick with. So I started doing some serious research and designed a program of my own.

Reinventing my way of life took some time and effort, to be sure. While I started feeling better right away, it was a good five years before I felt firmly on track with my goal of being 80 years young. But after 35 years in the investment business, I can attest that the hours I devoted to my own well-being were the best investment I ever made.

Along the way, I learned a lot and even wrote a book—*Just Move!*—as a guide for other people who want to slow down or even turn back the clock. If you, too, want to look and feel younger than your years as you age, here are some guideposts to consider:

### **We have more control over aging than we may think.**

The good news is, your DNA isn't your destiny. Your genetic makeup is only one piece of it, and not even the biggest piece.

As science has learned, lifestyle has a much bigger effect on how we age. In fact, sensible lifestyle choices can offset genetic

weaknesses, like a predisposition to heart disease or obesity. So don't assume you have no choice in the matter. We all get older, but that doesn't mean we have to get *old*.

### **Healthy aging doesn't have to be complicated.**

What all my research showed me was that it really comes down to taking good care of yourself—in other words, dropping bad lifestyle habits and picking up good ones. It boils down to the “big four” healthy habits that underlie successful aging:

1. *Do something physically active almost every day.* This doesn't mean you have to drag yourself through some arduous workout. It's about consistency, not how much you sweat and strain. Varying your activities will help you improve multiple dimensions of fitness, including cardiovascular, strength, flexibility, and balance. It also helps if your activities center on things you genuinely enjoy.
2. *Make smart food choices.* Forget about fads and strict diets. Deprivation isn't the point. Just concentrate on eating real, nutritious foods in reasonable portions.

3. *Practice good sleep hygiene.* There's no doubt that being sleep deprived is hazardous to your health. However, sleep meds aren't a sustainable solution, especially given their side effects. Before resorting to pharmaceuticals, consider what steps you could take to reinforce a consistent sleep cycle and create a good sleep environment.
  
4. *Limit stress.* Too much stress can undermine all the good things you do for your health. While we can't control the things that happen, we *can* control how we react to them. To keep a lid on stress, get out in nature, do something physical, meditate, or get immersed in a good book or hobby. Limiting media consumption can help too.

Healthy living doesn't require drudgery or sacrifice. It's the path to feeling good and finding more joy in life as we age. It also happens to be our best shot at preserving healthy brain function and lowering the risks of developing serious chronic conditions, like heart disease, diabetes, many types of cancer, and Alzheimer's.

Of course, there are no guarantees in life. Even the most dedicated exercisers can get sick. Still, being in decent shape not only improves your odds of staying healthy; it can also help your body be more resilient in the face of surgeries or other treatments.

Speaking for myself, I'd rather spend my time in the gym and on hiking trails than making the rounds of doctors' offices. Who wouldn't?

### **Don't expect to change everything at once.**

Shifting to a healthier way of life is more doable if you recognize that it's not like flipping a switch. It works best as a process of small, gradual steps. The key is to start where you are and make improvements at your own speed, based on your own needs and issues.

For me, it started with getting off the couch and becoming more physically active. My first priority was getting free of aches and pains, especially the back pain that was literally ruining my life. I also wanted to have more energy and lose the excess weight that made me sluggish.

Of course, after years of inactivity, I had to ease into it. So I simply started walking, five minutes a day at first, and gradually going farther and at a faster pace. I was surprised at how quickly I began feeling more energetic, more *alive*.

When you take that one step and see results, it makes you *want* to keep it up, and perhaps even progress to the next step.

My next step was strength training. I learned that lower back pain is often caused by a lack of strength in core muscles, so I

started working out in a gym. As I got stronger, and saw that I needed more stretching and better balance, it was no big deal to work those elements into my routine.

Getting healthier doesn't have to be grueling. With a little research or advice from a good trainer, you can easily put together a safe and effective program of exercise and nutrition. After that, it's a matter of showing up and doing the work.

All I can say is, it worked for me. Not only did my aches and pains subside, and then disappear, but I discovered I actually enjoyed working out.

So, starting today, do something your future self will thank you for. It doesn't matter what shape you're in. Make one small upgrade to your way of life, keep it up for 30 days, and then repeat the process. Just think how different your life could be a year from now!

### **Attitude is everything.**

To me, there's no question that physical fitness is the foundation of healthy aging. That's what helps you stay mobile and keep doing the things you enjoy.

But what's often overlooked is the role of mental and emotional fitness. A positive mindset, in particular, is a key ingredient in good health and life satisfaction. Only if we believe in our



potential to improve our lives—only if we believe we still have many things to live for—are we likely to commit to healthy aging.

So let's not dismiss “positive thinking” as fodder for Internet memes and greeting card clichés. In fact, there is substantial scientific evidence for the power of this philosophy. One major long-term study found that late-middle-agers who looked positively on aging lived an average of *seven and a half years longer* than those with a negative mindset.

Positive thinking is one more healthy habit you can develop with daily practice. Instead of lamenting what you can no longer do, focus on the things you *can* do. Above all, take a moment each day to be grateful for the life you have. There is always someone who would gladly trade places with you.

### **Your later years can be your best years.**

In 2020 I celebrated my 80th birthday, feeling happy and proud that I'd met my goal of being “80 years young.” So, what now?

When it comes to the “big four” healthy habits, I think I'm in pretty good shape. My eating habits, my sleep, and my stress levels are all what they need to be, and it's been four years since I quit drinking wine.

Nor do I need to get any more physically fit than I already am. My workouts now are geared to maintaining my current strength and endurance, knowing I may need them to help me get through whatever medical issues might lie ahead—and when you're over 80, there's always something.

My goal now is to enjoy each day, using my time and energy for things that add richness and meaning to life. Number one is my connections with others. Research tells us that having solid relationships is a better predictor of a long and happy life than any other factor. So I make a conscious daily effort to be a better husband, a better father, and a better friend.

Then there's purpose. However you define it, we all need something we love or feel compelled to do. It could be as simple as being that special grandparent. For me, it's finding ways of inspiring other older adults to live life to the fullest.

What inspires me, in turn, are the older people I meet who are still active and vigorous, still learning, discovering, and growing. I call them "SuperAgers." They seem fueled by a virtuous circle: the younger they feel, the more they think and act in ways that help keep them young.

I think of my friend, Hope, who at 92 gets a real charge out of competing in ballroom dancing contests. Or Robert, a history buff who read two or three books a week until he began losing his sight. Then he discovered audiobooks, and is now devouring

even more books than before. Or Rick, who at 88 is still rising early each morning to paint. They all radiate a way of being that says, “These years are precious, and I’m making the most of them.”

### **It’s about winning at life.**

People like them are proof that life doesn’t have to go downhill as we age. Our later years can be a time of personal growth and self-discovery—a time when we build on decades of life experience to become an even better version of ourselves.

So what if you can no longer do everything you once did? If you’ve got the desire and the curiosity to explore new ideas, to learn and to create, there’s no end of opportunity in all the things you still can do. We’re all works in progress.

Winning in business or a career is great. But if you reach an advanced age and are still glad to be alive, still finding your own ways to keep growing as a person—that’s what I call *winning at life*. And isn’t that the real object of the game?

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**James P. Owen**, now 81 and in the third act of his career, is an inspirational author, speaker, and SuperAger coach who is

himself inspired by older people still living life to the fullest. He is the author of *Just Move! A New Approach to Fitness After 50* and producer of *The Art of Aging Well*, a half-hour documentary film that has aired on PBS stations across the country and can be streamed from [theartofagingwell.com](http://theartofagingwell.com).