

3 Steps to Age Exuberantly

An 86-year-old author has a few rules to live by even when the trials of getting older make it easy to complain.



By Jancee Dunn New York Times

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A new book came across my desk recently, with an irresistible title: “The Swedish Art of Aging Exuberantly: Life Wisdom from Someone Who Will (Probably) Die Before You.” I was already familiar with the astringent humor of the author, Margareta Magnusson, having read her previous book, “The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning” — a surprise international best seller and a call to, as she put it, “not leave a mountain of crap behind for our loved ones to clean up after we die.”

I phoned Magnusson, who was an artist before becoming a published author and is now 86 years old, in Stockholm, to get some of her best advice on how to make life worth living, no matter your age.

Magnusson acknowledged that aging is hard. “You cannot stop the passing of time and how it affects your body, but you can work to keep a clear and positive mind,” she said. “You can be young upstairs in your head even if your joints creak.” Here are her top three tips.

Embrace *kärt besvär*

This Swedish phrase blends *kärt*, meaning “dear or cherished,” and *besvär*, which means “pain.” So, one *kärt besvär* might be paying your bills — an annoying obligation, but you’re still grateful that you have the money to pay. Or, it could be taking care of someone who is sick, which I’ve been doing this week with my flu-addled daughter. When I’m frazzled by her endless requests for streaming service passwords and mugs of tea,

delivered via text message, I remind myself that I'm glad I'm strong enough to take care of her.

As you get older, it's easy to be frustrated and complain, Magnusson said. But *kärt besvär* helps her to live with joy. "There seems to be no other choice than to see every nuisance as something that I must find a way to cherish," she said.

What I think Magnusson's getting at is the idea that it's OK to lean into your emotions — whatever they might be. Laura Carstensen, a psychologist at the Stanford Center on Longevity, who [has studied](#) the emotional changes that occur with age, said, "We find that older people are more likely to report a kind of mosaic of emotions than younger people do." While younger people tend to be "all positive or all negative," she said, older people are more able to experience joy "with a tear in the eye," she added.

Surround yourself with the young

This is Magnussen's simple definition of happiness: being around young people. Not only do they supply fresh ideas and perspectives, she said, but hearing about their plans and prospects "is a way to stay in tune with the young person you yourself were at some point."

Spending time with younger people can also benefit your brain, said Vonetta Dotson, a professor of psychology and gerontology at Georgia State University and author of "Keep Your Wits About You: The Science of Brain Maintenance as You Age."

There is [research to suggest](#) that as you age, especially if you're starting to experience some cognitive decline, socializing with younger people who are mentally sharp can provide the type of stimulation that helps boost cognitive functioning, she explained.

Yet this blending of generations often doesn't happen, Becca Levy, professor of epidemiology at the Yale School of Public Health and author of "Breaking The Age Code," said. "Because, unfortunately, there's quite a bit of age segregation in our culture."

Break that barrier by keeping your door (and fridge) open for grandchildren, if you have them nearby. Make an [8-minute phone call](#) to a

younger relative. Volunteer to read to children at your library, or sign up for an organization like Big Brothers Big Sisters.

And, to keep young people around you, Magnusson writes, “Just ask them questions. Listen to them. Give them food. Don’t tell them about your bad knee again.”

Say “yes” whenever possible

One of the misconceptions about older people, according to Regina Koepp, clinical psychologist and founder of the Center for Mental Health and Aging in Burlington, Vt., is that “they’re rigid and they’ll never change,” she said. “That’s not true. Older people are not more rigid than younger people. Those are personality traits, not age traits.” Yet even older adults have internalized this narrative, Dr. Koepp said, “because they’ve heard it their whole life.”

To age exuberantly, you must actively recognize your “internalized ageism” and fight against it, Dr. Koepp said. Saying “yes” as often as you can, she added, “is in effect saying ‘yes’ to life — being curious and exploratory, being part of community.”

Magnusson told me that the older she gets, the more she can vividly recall the things she has said “yes” to, just when she was on the verge of saying no, and how those experiences have made her life richer. “I’ve found that having a closed mind ages me more quickly than anything else,” she said. Before she refuses something — a dinner, an art show, buying a leather jacket — she asks herself: “Is it that I *can’t* do it, or I *won’t*?”

“Give it a try, whatever it is,” she said. “Maybe you’ll go to a party and be the last to leave because you’re having such a good time.” I asked Magnusson when she last shut down a party. “A week ago,” she said.