


The Secrets of Resilient Aging

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When you were a kid you might have played, “connect the dots” in which you drew lines from dot number 1 to dot number 2, and from this dot to dot number 3. At first you just saw a bunch of points, but as you connected more and more of the dots, a picture began to emerge, until the entire picture was revealed before your eyes. I’d like to connect some dots for you that have to do with optimal aging.

There are two factors that contribute to the aging and wearing down of your body. First, there is the ongoing and pervasive nature of stress. Hans Selye, the famous researcher who adapted the concept of stress from physics to the human body said that aging is simply the sum total of all the stresses we place on our bodies. Our ancestors didn’t have to worry about stress killing them since they had more immediate and threatening dangers. They were not going to be around long enough for the progressive ravages of stress to take their toll. But today we want to live much longer than 30, 50 or even 70 years of age. And thus the cumulative

impact of stress is a more important issue.

A second biological factor that might give us pause, which is true for all species, is that our biological clocks are designed, through the evolutionary process, to begin wearing down once we serve our evolutionary purpose. Evolution is based on the survival of the species, not you as an individual. And for a species to have the greatest chance of continuing, the individual must live long enough to produce offspring, and then long enough to help those offspring get to an age in which they can survive on their own. Once these goals are achieved, the individual no longer serves its biological purpose. In fact, with limited resources, living past this age actually places a burden on the species as these older individuals are taking away precious resources from those who can still reproduce. For this reason, the evolutionary process begins to trigger the dying process once biological productivity is over. This can occur around age 35 to 40.

These facts are not too encouraging unless you know how to address and modify both processes. In my book, "The Path: Mastering the Nine Pillars of Resilience and Success" I discuss resilient aging and mastering these challenges. Resilient aging is the term I use when you are in harmony with your environment and engage just the right amount of energy – the mobilization of your body's resources – to accomplish a task; no more and no less. And then, you properly engage your body's recuperative mechanisms to restore the resources used up during a stressful experience.

There are two very recent advances in science that can actually modify the biology that you were born with and the result of eons of development. The first is neurogenesis and the second is epigenetics. Neurogenesis is the discovery that our brains are capable of birthing new nerve cells throughout our lives. This is in contrast to the scientific belief, up until little more than a generation ago, that we are born with a full complement of nerve cells that continually die off throughout our lives. This new information fuels our ability for neuroplasticity: new learning and new ways of doing things. Through this process, it is actually possible to reshape the fight or flight response that we engage whenever we are under stress. In other words, we can literally retrain our bodies to produce a more appropriate response that I refer to in my book as a "calm focus". This new type of stress response incorporates the components necessary to deal with most modern stresses: focus, awareness and flexibility, while reducing the muscle tensing and elevated heart rate components that contribute greatly to the aging and deterioration process. In other words, through a combination of thinking and practicing a calming or relaxation response, we can redesign our stress response. I know this is possible as I've achieved it with many elite athletes who perform optimally under great pressure.

The second aging mechanism in which the dying process is triggered when you are no longer necessary for the perpetuation of the species can also be conquered. And this is where purpose comes in to play. But first I need to bring in another newly discovered neuroscientific process, called epigenetics. This term refers to newly uncovered lessons of the interaction of our genetic makeup and the environment. This research has demonstrated that how your genes get expressed – the process by which a gene's information develops

into cells and tissue – is responsive to your environment.

One aspect of your environment is your belief system. And here is where you can actually fool Mother Nature. Actually, it's not fooling Mother Nature; it's taking advantage of a unique way that we humans differ from all other species: We are able to create purpose beyond our survival needs. If you have a purpose in your life, you are giving your mind-body the message: "I have something very important that I must do, so you better stay healthy and strong until I complete this purpose." If it's a lifelong purpose, then you will be imploring your brain and body to stay healthy and function optimally for as long as possible. This might not be true if your life purpose is to make a lot of money and then consume more resources, but if your purpose can help other humans, you might be on the right track for resilient aging.

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