

GUEST ESSAY

My Mother Got on a Bike. It Changed Her Life.

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By Caroline Paul

The author of “Tough Broad: From Boogie Boarding to Wing Walking — How Outdoor Adventure Improves Our Life as We Age.”

When my mother was 62 years old, she dusted off a clunky Cannondale with Mary Poppins handles and joined a bicycling group. She was recovering from heartbreak and had just moved to a new town. She had no background as an outdoor activity enthusiast: She did not camp or hike, had never, say, paddled a kayak. But the bike group was made up of 60-, 70- and 80-year-olds. How hard could it be to tag along?

As I approach the age my mother was then, I notice my peers are increasingly galled by their advancing years. And why not? My friends are simply responding to the very real negative messaging

around older women: fading looks, frail bones, cognitive decline, no cultural significance. I overheard one woman discussing plastic surgery and remarking, “Who doesn’t want to turn back time?” It’s hard not to get sucked into that mind-set.

Yet the way we look at our own aging predicts what our future holds, as Becca Levy, a professor of public health at Yale, writes in her recent book, “Breaking the Age Code.” We increase our risk of cardiac events and speed up cognitive decline, studies show, if we believe getting older is a time of suffering and diminution. More important, the opposite is also true: Those of us who view later life as a time of growth and vitality are more likely to stay healthy and to keep senility at bay. We may also end up living a whopping seven and a half years longer. In one instance, Dr. Levy looked at data from a longitudinal study and came to this astonishing conclusion: Mind-set was *the most significant factor* determining individuals’ longevity.

But all around us, the media, dating apps, our youth-obsessed culture and our own preconceived notions lead to one verdict: Aging stinks. It will be a white-knuckle ride, women are told, through increasing frailty and irrelevance. Affirmations and positive self-talk — skimming the surface of our psyches, outnumbered in the scrum — don’t stand a chance. Dr. Levy’s studies show us that we need to believe fervently in the vitality of our future. But how?

My mother joined that bike group. What was initially a distraction spun into a passion. She became a serious cyclist, the kind of serious who wore brightly colored bike shirts, used Lance Armstrong breathing techniques and planned group rides. I rode my bike with my mother once; believe me, there is nothing more disheartening than being trash-talked by one's mom as she huffs by you on a hill. Pedaling through her 70s, she explored steep mountain roads and new towns. She entered 100-mile races, changed flats and downed electrolytes on the go.

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I was envious of her new life. Except for the Metamucil regimens and early bedtimes, she and her fellow seniors resembled any weekend warrior. But unlike so many people I knew, she and her friends didn't seem to want to be younger. My mother became more fit, more social and more emotionally expressive than I'd ever seen her.

Turns out, my mother's cycling habit meant that she was checking many of the boxes — health, novelty, community and purpose — needed to age well. (For others, this might come in the form of a language class, a book club, a commitment to mastering a plank.)

Yet when my mother went biking, there was something more: She was embracing attributes like exhilaration, exploration, awe, a little bit of recklessness. This provided the final pillar for healthy and fulfilling aging: Dr. Levy's positive mind-set.

But how? My mom didn't live in a bubble; she had not escaped subliminal toxic messaging. It was the bicycling, with its demands for physical vitality, the uncertainty of every ride, the grit on the uphill, the inherent "wheeeeeee" aspect of fun on the downhill — all powerful proof of that messaging's mendacity. As her beliefs were being subverted, her biking adventures also drew surprised and admiring reactions from peers and from those much younger (like her own children). "Wow!" and "Badass!" were the elated responses, which boosted her passion for the sport and her life. (Another thing not expected of older women: passion.)

Consider another study, in which Dr. Levy and her co-authors used computers to display positive subliminal phrases about aging (like "spry," "capable") to older participants in several sessions over several weeks. The researchers found these participants performed better on physical tests and ended up with a more favorable perception of aging.

Likewise, my mother's biking adventures served as their own flashing screen. Every pedal uphill was a subliminal shout that she was strong. Every heart skip on a downhill told her she was brave and fun. Every new route she planned showed she was

capable. She was being immersed in implicit feedback that upended what she (and others) had been told one could and could not do or be at this age.

Most older women don't join bike groups. Instead, we begin to pull back on physical activities, risk taking or novel pursuits. Too dangerous for our failing body and mind, we are told in ways both subliminal and overt, and we believe it. But what if danger is found in failing to pursue exhilaration, exploration and physical vitality?

Unwittingly my mother knew: These attributes don't imperil us. They protect us.

Activating exhilaration, exploration and physical vitality will be different for each of us. In my quest to understand healthy aging. I met a 93-year-old hiker, a 74-year-old BMX biker, an 80-year-old scuba diver and a slew of boogie boarders in their 60s, 70s and 80s. I walked on the wing of a plane at 3,000 feet in the air. But I also went bird-watching. Adventure, it turns out, is in the eye of the beholder and can be had by almost all of us, despite physical restrictions, financial constraints or limited backcountry know-how.

Over and over, these women told me in different ways: Pick an outdoor activity, one that will electrify and engage, because it will change your life. To those who warn you against such foolishness, remind them of what Joan Captain, a player on one of San Diego's

senior women's soccer leagues, told a journalist when she was 72: "People say, oh, that's so dangerous, you know, you should take it easy. And I say, well, you see that couch over there? The couch will kill you."

My mother stopped cycling only as she approached 80. She had begun to feel unsteady on her bike; she was soon diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. At some point, then, the messaging has some truth. But this isn't disheartening. This is just one more reason to embrace everything now. I'm sure my mother would still be pedaling if not for this stroke of bad luck. Instead, she gets outside any way she can, often on a walk around her neighborhood. On a recent amble, she waxed nostalgic but not about her youth. "I wish I was 60 again," she mused, and we slowly continued down the sidewalk.

Caroline Paul's books include "Tough Broad: From Boogie Boarding to Wing Walking — How Outdoor Adventure Improves Our Lives as We Age" and "The Gutsy Girl: Escapades for Your Life of Epic Adventure."

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